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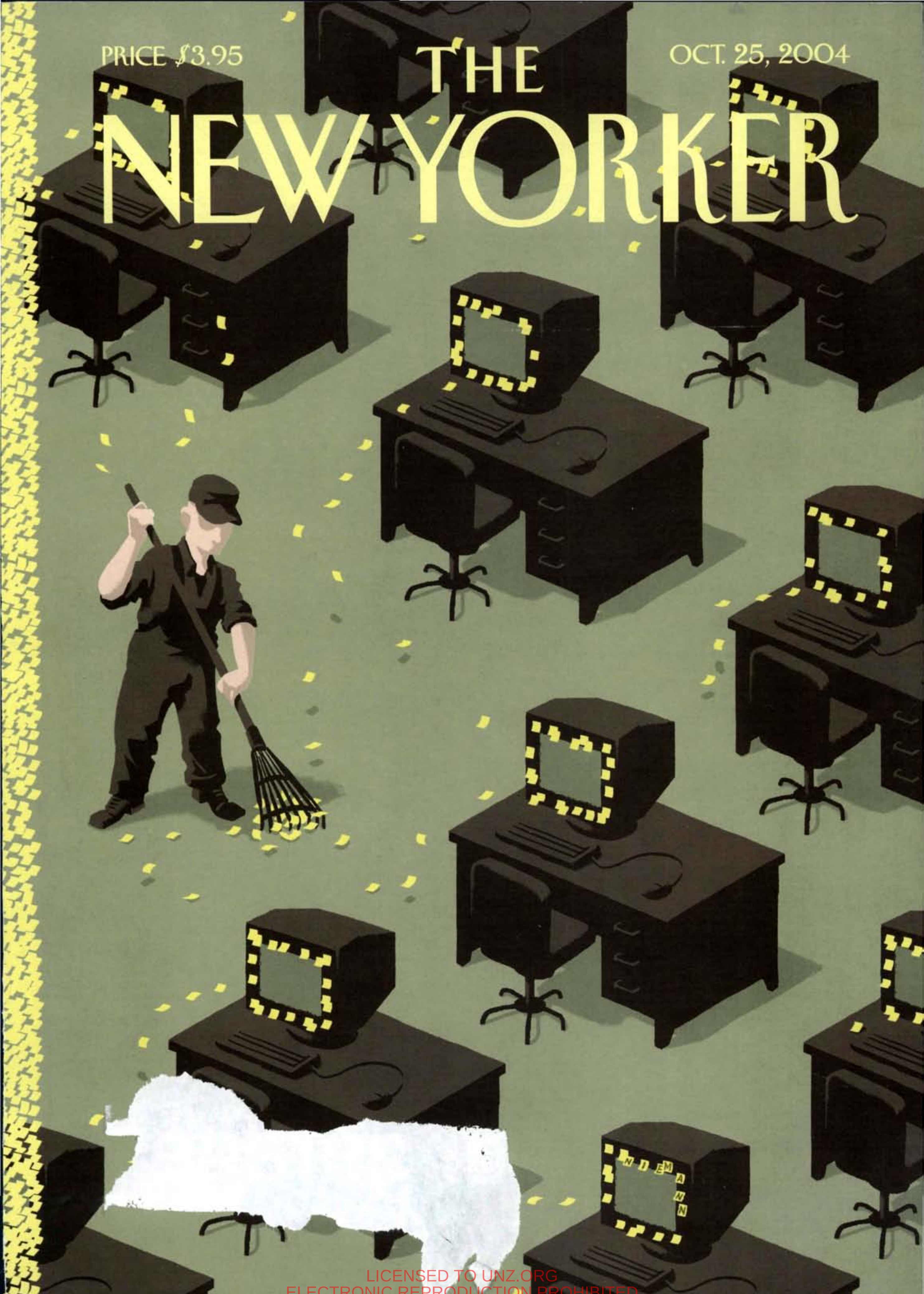
THE NEW YORKER

OCT. 25, 2004



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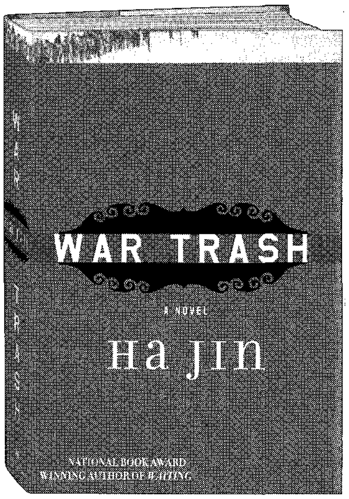

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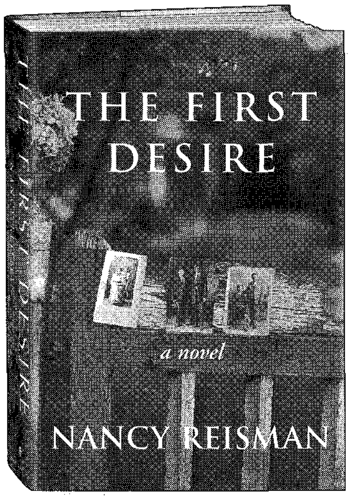

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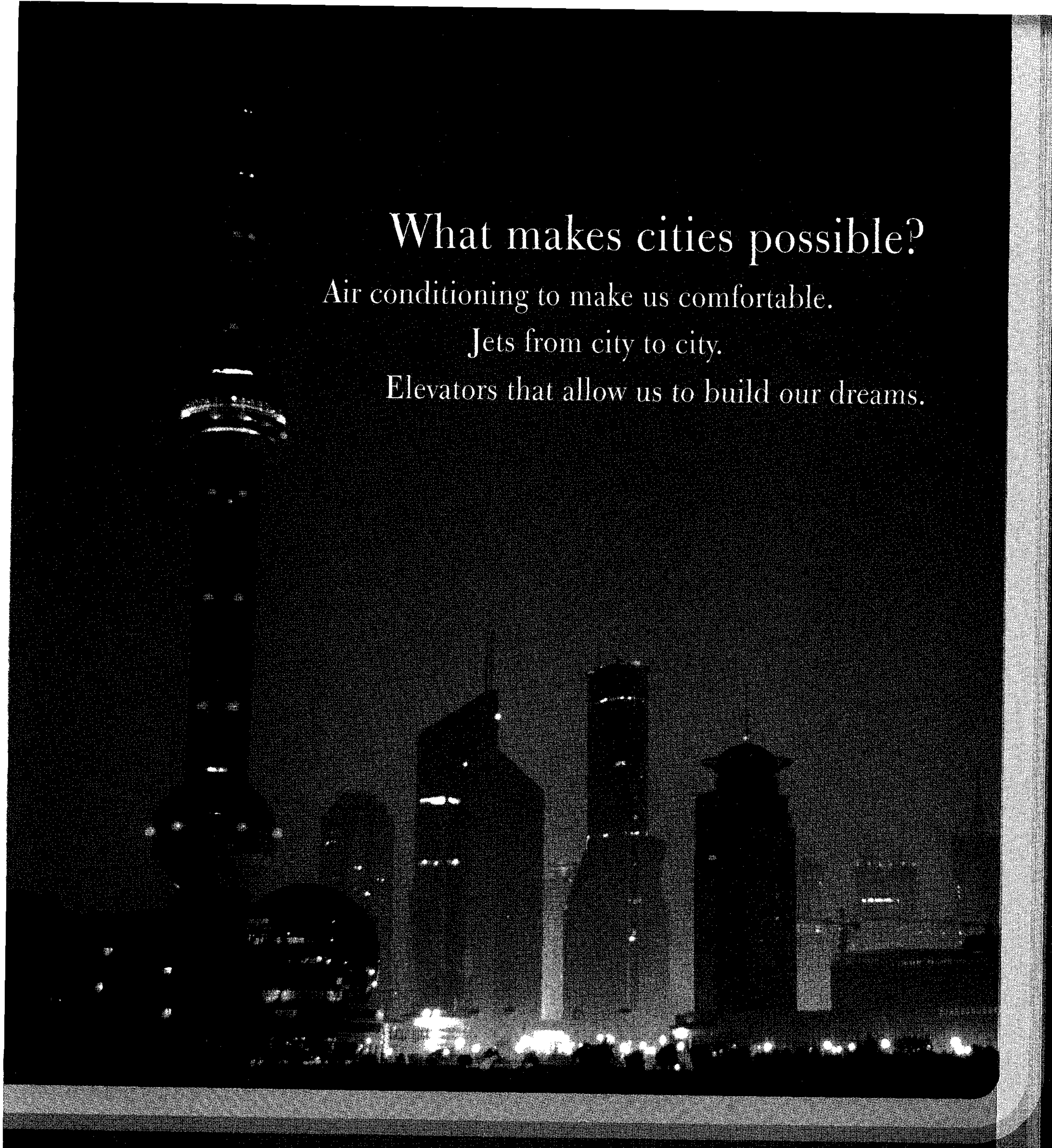
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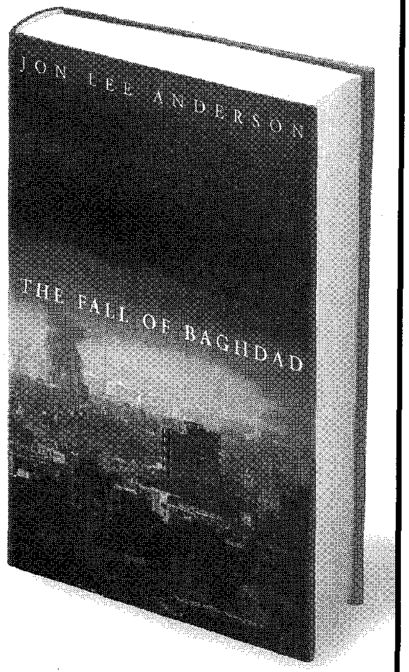

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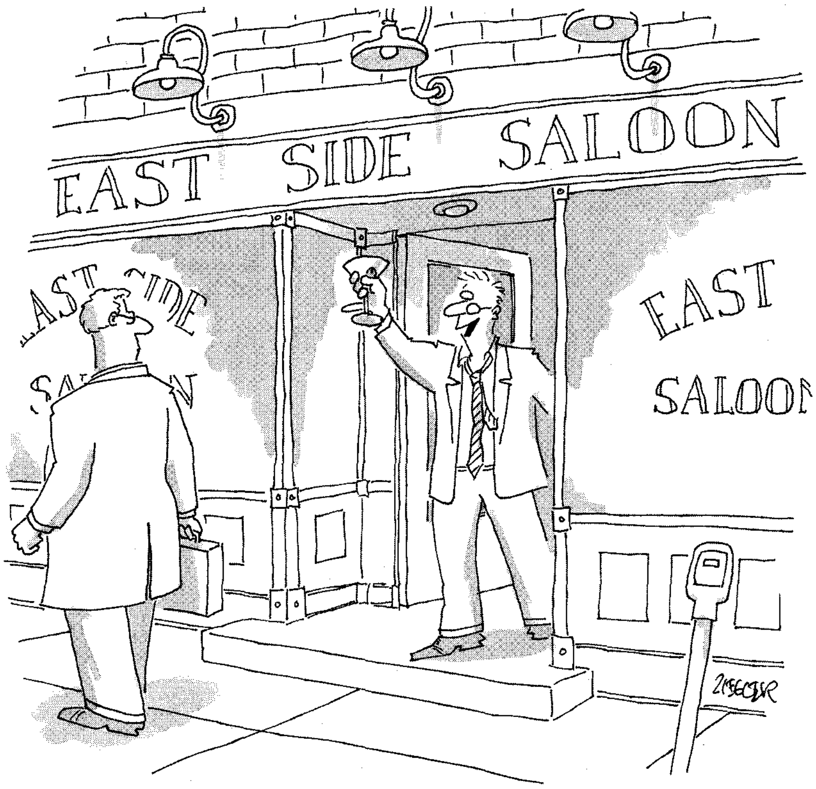
Glen Baxter (Illustration, p. 74) is an artist living in England. His latest book of drawings is “Loomings Over the Suet.”

Thomas McGuane (Fiction, p. 74) is the author of thirteen books, including “The Cadence of Grass,” a novel.

Malcolm Gladwell (A Critic at Large, p. 86) will publish “Blink: The Power of Thinking Without Thinking,” in January.

Marjane Satrapi (The Back Page, p. 98) has just published “Persepolis 2,” the second part of her comic-strip autobiography. ♦



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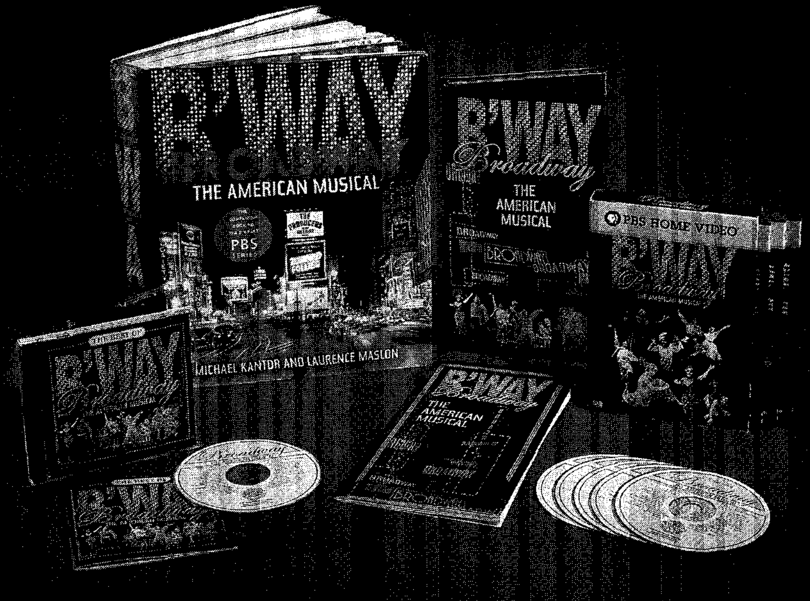
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Feast-making spoon (wunkirmian), 20th century, Dan, Cote d'Ivoire, (Seattle Art Museum: Gift of Katherine White and the Boeing Company).

THE MAIL

WHEN THE OIL IS GONE

John Cassidy may well be right in saying that energy independence is currently an unattainable goal for the United States ("Pump Dreams," October 11th). When it comes to the future, however, the physical reality of global warming will ultimately trump other political considerations. Arguments about tax incentives and off-shore drilling are insignificant compared with the hard realities facing us: global warming is an inescapable consequence of burning fossil fuels, and the longer we wait to find an alternative the more disruptive, costly, and painful the transition will be. Climate change will inevitably force us to find a solution, regardless of what politicians are now willing or able to do.
Larry Geni
Evanston, Ill.

As someone who conducts research in the field of solar generation of hydrogen by the photocleavage of water, I find it distressing, reading Cassidy's article, that our nation throws billions here, there, and everywhere, except at the research needed to find practical alternatives to oil. The truth is that funding for alternative energy sources in the U.S. is effectively zero, at a time when other countries, notably Switzerland and Japan, are supporting significant efforts to find replacements for oil. As a result, if energy alternatives to oil are found it's quite likely that the intellectual property will not reside in the U.S.—and that the vast wealth that the market in energy represents, now flowing to our friends in the Middle East, will continue to flow elsewhere, to the detriment of our nation.
Craig Grimes
Professor of Electrical Engineering
Materials Science and Engineering
Pennsylvania State University
University Park, Pa.

Cassidy conspicuously avoids discussing nuclear energy—a proven means of generating power. As a nation, we need to talk about nuclear energy in a serious way: the per-unit cost in comparison with hydrocarbons and other alternatives; the fact that the United States can build nuclear power plants entirely independent of other nations; and, of course, the nuclear-waste issue as a reason not to go this route. But to ignore it would be like the Environmental Protection Agency issuing its report on the state of the environment without once mentioning global warming.
Samuel L. Martin
New York City

Cassidy refers to President Bush and Vice-President Cheney's "acute understanding" of the energy business. Bush failed as a wildcatter, and Cheney got his job at Halliburton because his government contacts could translate into contracts, not because of his knowledge of energy, or even oil. In developing our nation's energy policy, Cheney, who has fought to keep the names of the energy executives he consulted secret from the public, seems to have simply followed the advice of industry insiders. Not surprisingly, what brokers of fossil fuels recommend is increasing the supply of their current products and only insignificant efforts to pursue alternative energy sources or reduce consumption. And the policies that these companies are allowed to dictate are not even in anyone's long-term interest. Other nations have made it clear that there will be growing global markets for energy-efficient products and diversified energy sources. What's our government doing to insure that America will be able to compete in those markets? The only thing Bush and Cheney understand acutely is how to take care of their own.
Al Sim
Covesville, Va.

•

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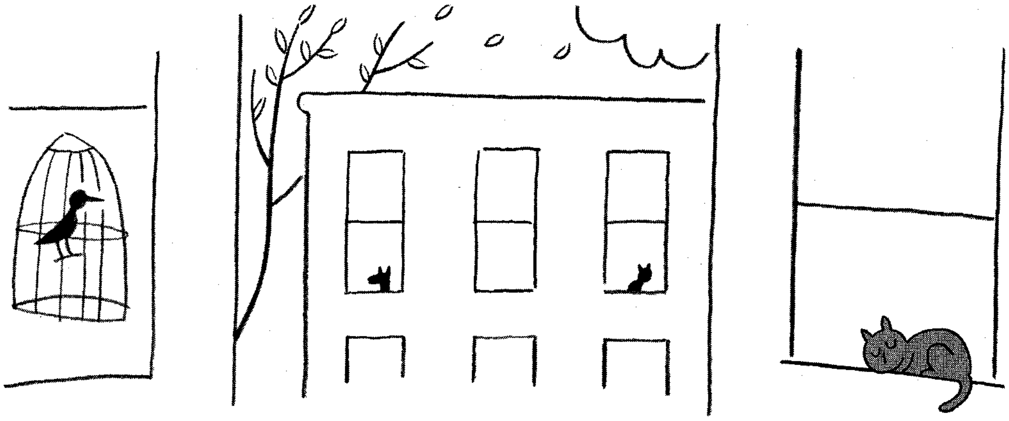

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			20	21	22	23
24	25	26				

For expanded events listings, please visit www.newyorker.com/goingson.

THIS WEEK

THE PAST IS NEVER PAST

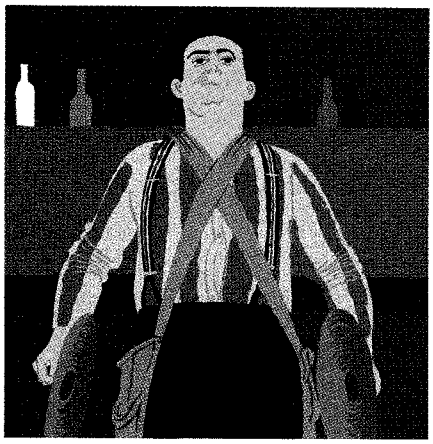
Peter Davis's "Hearts and Minds" takes its title from a statement about Vietnam from President Lyndon Johnson: "The ultimate victory will depend on the hearts and minds of the people who actually live out there." Like the war it covers, this 1974 documentary still divides audiences. Some find its arguments overblown and unconvincing—for example, Davis links the violent, competitive mind-set of war to that of football—while others hail it as the definitive antiwar movie. What's undeniable is the striking and often terrible beauty of the color footage and the film's continuing relevance to the American military and political landscape. (Film Forum, opens Oct. 22; see Movies.)

ABBEY ROAD COMPANY

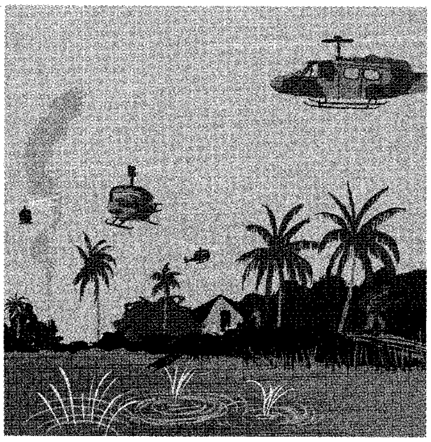
William Butler Yeats founded Ireland's Abbey Theatre a century ago, with the help of his literary patroness Lady Augusta Gregory, so that Ireland's playwrights could avail themselves of a proper national theatre. In honor of this anniversary, the company has gone on a two-month U.S. tour, and brings its signature production, J. M. Synge's "The Playboy of the Western World," to New York's Skirball Center for the Performing Arts. A shocking (for 1907) drama about a cold-blooded raconteur, the play was first performed for New Yorkers by the Abbey Theatre in 1911. (Oct. 26-31; see Theatre.)

NATURAL HIGH

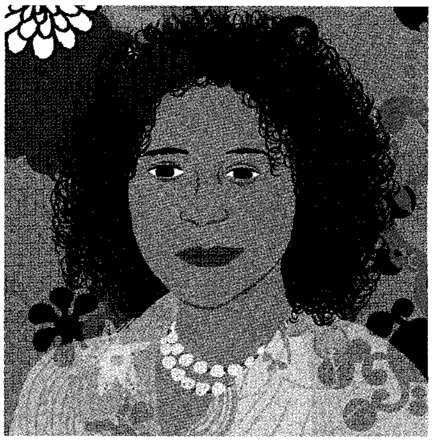
The Brazilian painter Beatriz Milhazes, born in 1960, usually works in acrylic on canvas. Her large and intricately patterned designs are often drawn from plant life, and the effect can be like looking at a rain forest through a kaleidoscope. If Milhazes's generous application of paint and lush colors can be a little overripe at times, that doesn't make them sentimental—there's an almost sinister quality to their denseness that doesn't leave much breathing room. (Cohan, opens Oct. 23; see Art.)



The Abbey Theatre's "The Playboy of the Western World," at the Skirball Center.

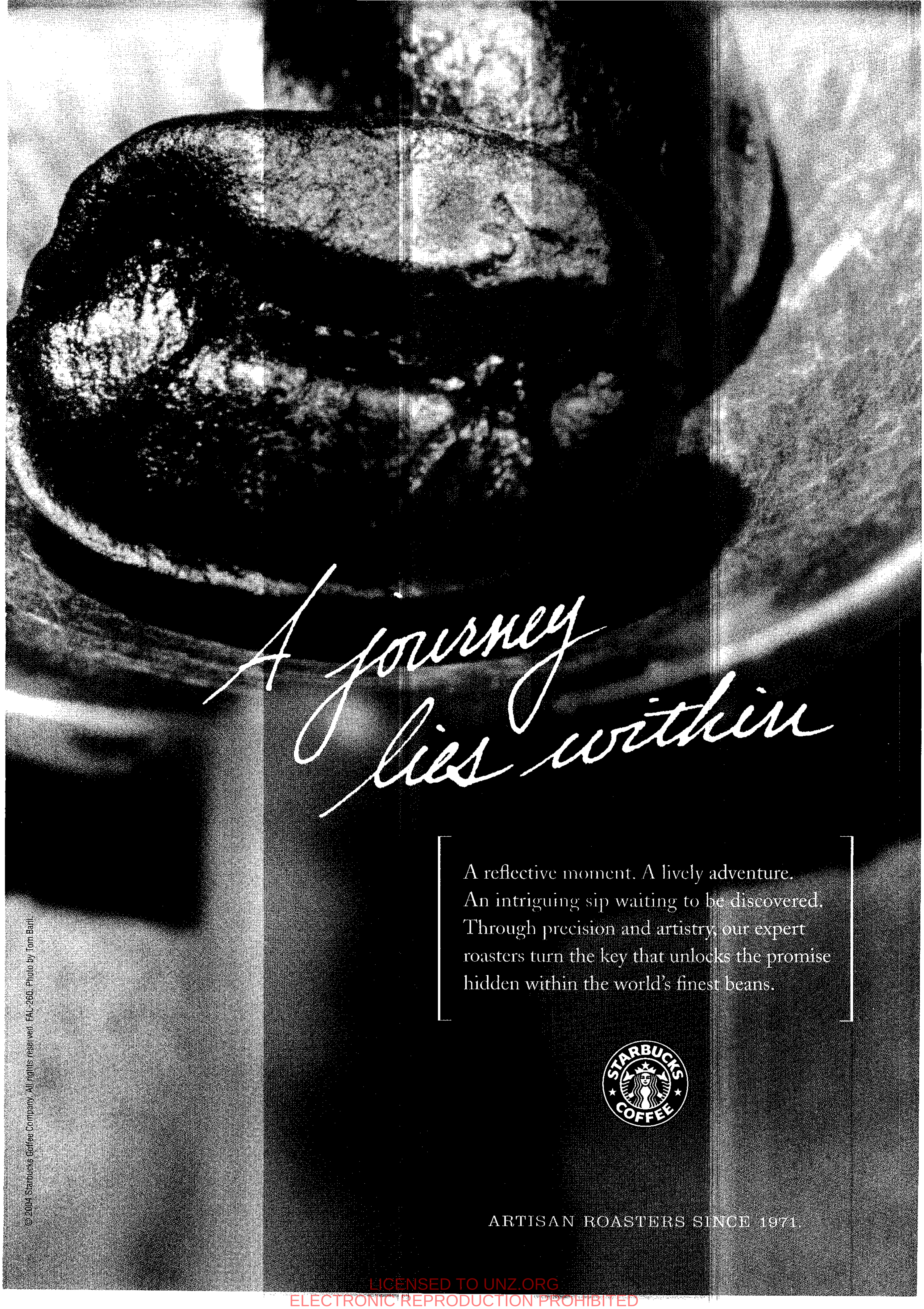


"Hearts and Minds," Peter Davis's Vietnam documentary, at Film Forum.



JOSÉ LUIS MERINO

Beatriz Milhazes, whose paintings are on display at the Cohan gallery.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THE THEATRE
OPENINGS AND PREVIEWS

Please call the phone number listed with the theatre for timetables and ticket information.

BROOKLYN: THE MUSICAL
A young Parisienne named Brooklyn seeks fame and her long-lost father, in a new musical set in the heroine's namesake borough. Book, music, and lyrics by Mark Schoenfeld and Barri McPherson. Directed by Jeff Calhoun. One preview on Oct. 20. Opens Oct. 21 at 6:45. (Plymouth, 236 W. 45th St. 212-239-6200.)

DANNY AND THE DEEP BLUE SEA
Second Stage Theatre presents a revival of John Patrick Shanley's 1984 play about a hard-luck couple, played by Adam Rothenberg and Rosemarie DeWitt, who meet in a dive bar in the Bronx. Directed by Leigh Silverman. Previews begin Oct. 21. (307 W. 43rd St. 212-246-4422.)

DIRTY TRICKS
A new play about Martha Mitchell (Judith Ivey), the outspoken wife of Nixon's attorney general, John Mitchell, who blabbed to the press during Watergate. Written by John Jeter and directed by Margaret Whitton, with sets by Neil Patel. In previews. (Public, 425 Lafayette St. 212-239-6200.)

EVE-OLUTION
Sabrina Le Beauf and Carolyn McCormick lead the cast in an autobiographical play by Hilary Illick and Jennifer Krier, about the trials of working mothers. Directed by Carolyn Cantor. Opens Oct. 20 at 6:45. (Cherry Lane, 38 Commerce St. 212-239-6200.)

FIVE BY TENN
Kathleen Chalfant stars in a Manhattan Theatre Club production of five one-act plays by Tennessee Williams. Four of them are recent discoveries: "The Fat Man's Wife," "Adam and Eve on a Ferry," "And Tell Sad Stories of the Death of Queens," and "Summer at the Lake." Directed by Michael Kahn. In previews. (131 W. 55th St. 212-581-1212.)

THE FOREIGNER
Matthew Broderick and Frances Sternhagen star in the Roundabout Theatre Company's revival of Larry Shue's comedy about an unsociable Brit who goes on vacation in the American South and pretends he doesn't speak English. Directed by Scott Schwartz. In previews. (Laura Pels, 111 W. 46th St. 212-719-1300.)

THE GOOD BODY
Eve Ensler follows up "The Vagina Monologues" with a new play that explores women's body-image issues. Directed by Peter Askin. Previews begin Oct. 22. (Booth, 222 W. 45th St. 212-239-6200.)

THE GOSPEL AT COLONUS
Charles S. Dutton joins the Blind Boys of Alabama, the Legendary Soul Stirrers, and local choral groups in a revival of the Obie-winning 1983 musical, created by Lee Breuer and Bob Telson, which sets Sophocles' Oedipus drama in a Pentecostal gospel service. Previews begin Oct. 25. (Apollo, 253 W. 125th St. 212-531-5305.)

THE IMMIGRANT
A new musical, with a book by Mark Harelik, lyrics by Sarah Knapp, and music by Steven M. Alper, tells the true story of a Russian Jewish immigrant who entered this country in 1909—through Galveston, Texas, not Ellis Island. In previews. (Dodger Stages, 340 W. 50th St. 212-239-6200.)

JEWTOPIA
A comedy by Bryan Fogel and Sam Wolfson about a Gentile whose Jewish best friend teaches him how to get a Jewish wife. Directed by John Tillinger. Two previews on Oct. 20. Opens Oct. 21 at 7. (Westside, 407 W. 43rd St. 212-239-6200.)

'NIGHT, MOTHER
Brenda Blethyn and Edie Falco star in a revival of Marsha Norman's play about a mother and her suicidal daughter. Directed by Michael Mayer. Previews begin Oct. 22. (Royale, 242 W. 45th St. 212-239-6200.)

PEOPLE ARE WRONG
The singer-songwriter John Flansburgh, of They Might Be Giants, makes his stage début in a musical about the misadventures of a Manhattan couple who move to a house in the country. A co-production of the Vineyard Theatre and Target Margin. With music and lyrics by Julia Greenberg and Robin Goldwasser. Directed by David Herskovits. Previews begin Oct. 22. (Vineyard, 108 E. 15th St. 212-353-0303.)

Mavis Staples performs two shows this week (see Night Life).

EDEL RODRIGUEZ

THE PLAYBOY OF THE WESTERN WORLD
Ireland's Abbey Theatre brings J. M. Synge's drama to New York in a production directed by Ben Barnes (see This Week). Opens Oct. 26 at 7. (Skirball Center for the Performing Arts, 566 LaGuardia Pl. 212-992-8484.)

SAKHARAM BINDER
Vijay Tendulkar's controversial play, about a Brahmin bookbinder who takes advantage of abandoned women in the guise of kindness, was banned in India thirty years ago. Now it comes to New York, presented by the Play Company, translated by Kumud Mehta and Shanta Gokhale, and directed by Maria Mileaf ("Private Jokes, Public Places"). Previews begin Oct. 21. (59E59, at 59 E. 59th St. 212-279-4200.)

SENPO SUGIHARA
A drama about the Japanese consul Chinue Sugihara, who saved thousands of Lithuanian Jews during the Second World War. Written by Koichi Hiraishi and directed by Hiraishi and by Shoichi Yamada. Oct. 21-24. (Kaye Playhouse, Hunter College, 68th St. at Lexington Ave. 212-772-4448.)

SIN (A CARDINAL DEPOSED)
A play by Michael Murphy examines the role that Cardinal Bernard F. Law played in the sexual-abuse scandals that rocked the Boston archdiocese, weaving together the Cardinal's deposition testimony and accounts from victims and their families. Directed by Carl Forsman. In previews. Opens Oct. 26 at 8. (Clurman, 410 W. 42nd St. 212-239-6200.)

TRIBECA THEATRE FESTIVAL
Robert de Niro, Jane Rosenthal, and Craig Hatkoff, founders of the Tribeca Film Festival, have joined with the Drama Dept. to bring theatre to the neighborhood as well. The festival includes readings, screenings, performances of works in progress, and discussions with playwrights, directors, and actors (Ethan Hawke, Stephen Adly Guirgis, and Charles Busch, to name a few). Most events occur at Tribeca Cinemas, at 54 Varick Street, but "The Downtown Plays," an evening of new work by Wendy Wasserstein, Neil LaBute, Jon Robin Baitz, Douglas Carter Beane, and five other playwrights, directed by John Rando ("Urinetown"), takes place at the Michael Schimmel Center for the Arts at Pace University. Oct. 19-31. (For complete festival information, visit www.tribecatheaterfestival.com. 212-941-2450.)

TWELVE ANGRY MEN
Philip Bosco, Larry Bryggman, Boyd Gaines, and ten others appear in the Roundabout Theatre Company's revival of Reginald Rose's fifties jury drama. Directed by Scott Ellis. In previews. (American Airlines Theatre, 227 W. 42nd St. 212-719-1300.)

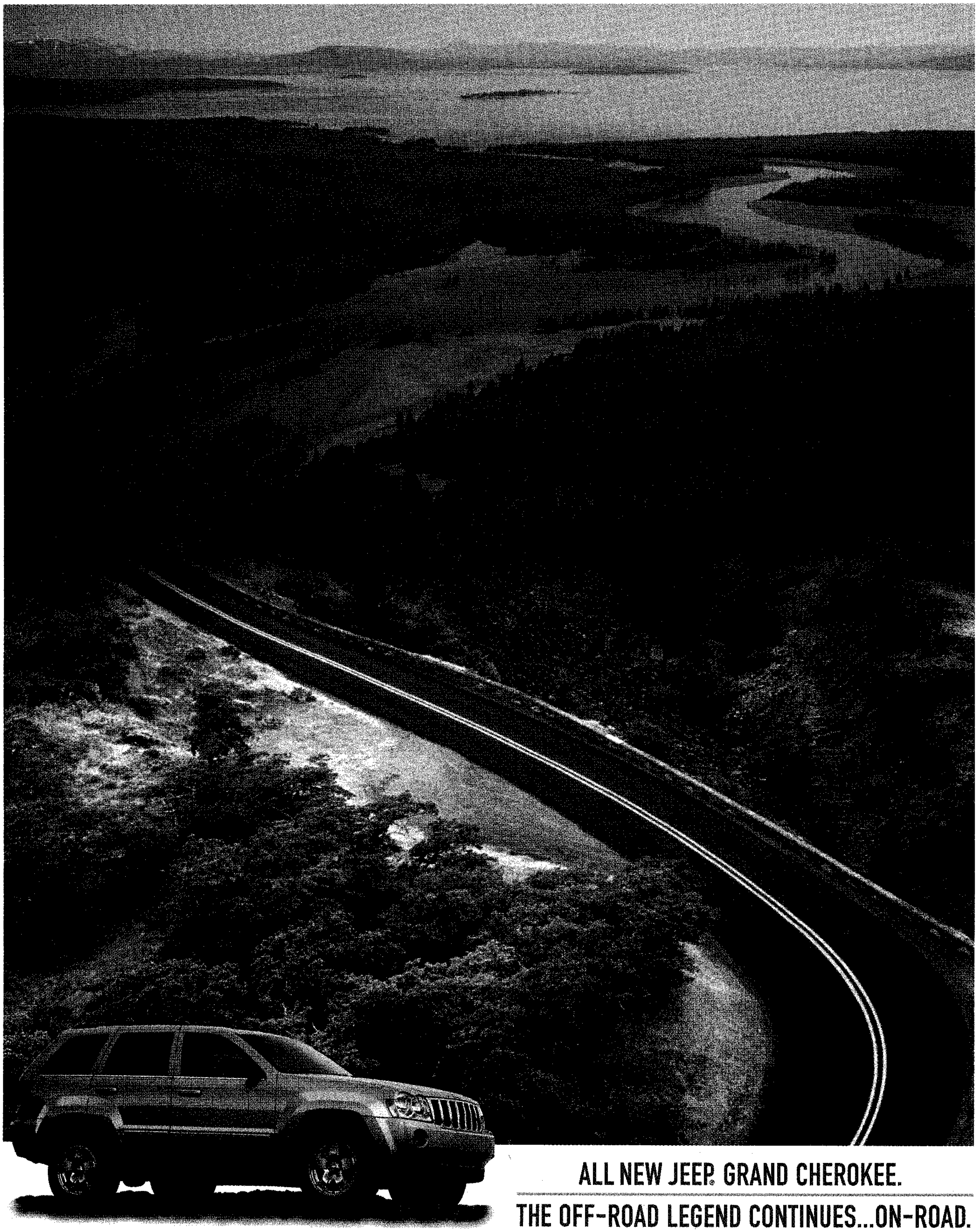
OPENED RECENTLY

GOOD SAMARITANS
In Richard Maxwell's new play, a complicated romance between an older woman (Rosemary Allen) who runs a halfway house for addicts and one of her charges (Kevin Hurley) is punctuated with awkward songs that get to the idea of yearning without elevating or prettifying it. The set and costumes are meticulously true to life, but, as in other Maxwell productions, the actors' delivery of their lines is deliberately flat and uninflected. The play resists any sort of easiness: there's no sentimentality, no pat answers, no happy ending. (St. Ann's Warehouse, 38 Water St., Brooklyn. 718-254-8779. Through Oct. 24.)

HECUBA
The acting teacher Kristin Linklater has taught Bernadette Peters, Bill Murray, and Sigourney Weaver, among others. In the title role in Euripides' drama, she speaks in a thrilling voice and varies the facial contortions of the tragic mask as she relives the sorrows of Hecuba, the fallen queen of Troy. Lucas Blondheim portrays her slain son Polydorus with striking reserve, and Helmar August Cooper, as Talthybius, the herald of Agamemnon, manages to complement Linklater's powerful presence. With an electronic score by Allison Leyton-Brown and Kaveh Nabatian, performed live. Directed by Alex Lippard. (45 Below, at 45 Bleecker St. 212-352-3101. Through Oct. 30.)

HEDDA GABLER
In Ivo van Hove's forceful update of the Ibsen play, Glenn Fitzgerald gives a charged performance as Eilert Lovborg, the brooding, self-destructive genius that Hedda Gabler (Elizabeth Marvel) desires, envies, and hates. Marvel's Gabler emphasizes her childish cruelty rather than her abstracted dreaminess: she dresses in a baby-doll negligee and has tantrums when her wishes are thwarted. (New York Theatre Workshop, 79 E. 4th St. 212-239-6200. Through Oct. 24.)

LAST EASTER
In Bryony Lavery's deft and compelling play, three friends—a swishy, "deeply shallow" singer and female impersonator called Gash (the superb Jeffrey Carlson), a prop-maker named Leah (the droll Clea Lewis), and a bibulous actress named Joy



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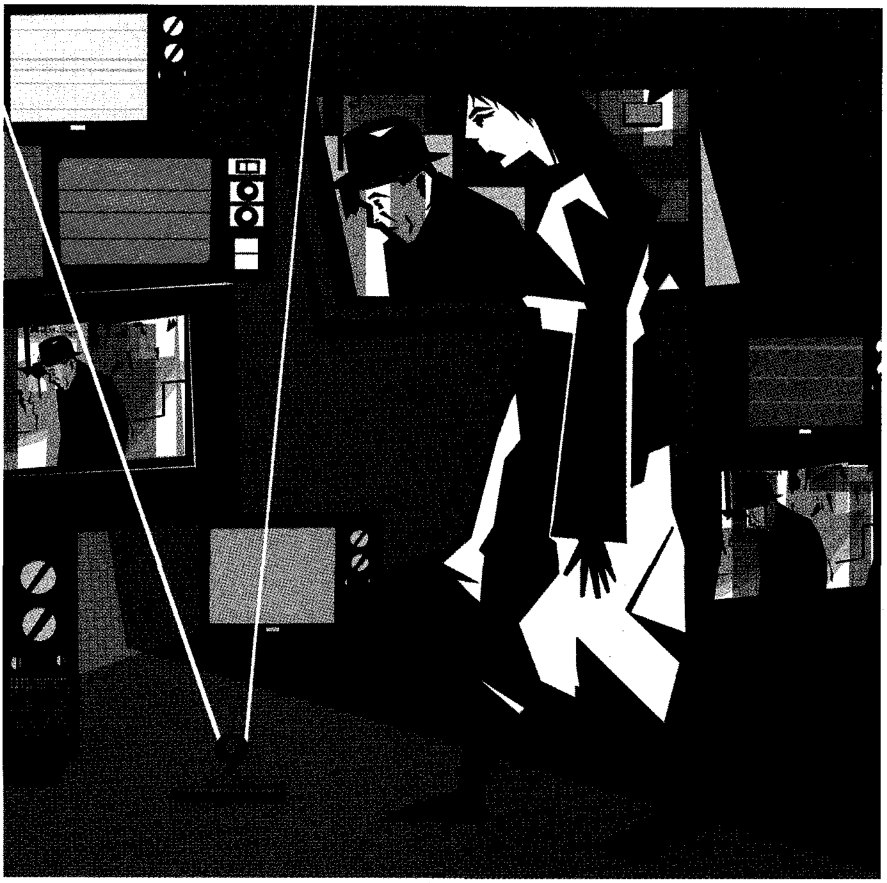


Koosil-ja appears in "Deadmandancing Excess" at the Performing Garage.

KIM DEMARCO

(Florencia Lozano)—take the play's central character, a dying lighting designer named June (Veanne Cox), to Lourdes to seek a religious cure, which she twits as "a phenomenon celebrated by a religion I don't believe in." Lavery's jokes allow her to have it both ways, embracing both the negative and the positive. (Reviewed in our issue of 10/18/04.) (Lucille Lortel, 121 Christopher St. 212-279-4200. Through Oct. 24.)

NINE PARTS OF DESIRE

A searing work written and performed by the Iraqi-American playwright Heather Raffo, who uses a big black shawl to transform herself into a series of Iraqi women and girls whose lives she researched over the past eleven years. One is a child who unwittingly caused her father's death during Saddam Hussein's regime. Another is an obstetrician who has to cope with the country's recent epidemic of birth defects. Others include an artist, an expat, and a grieving mother. With courage, wit, and keen observation, Raffo puts a human face on a distant population. Directed by Joanna Settle. (Manhattan Ensemble Theatre, 55 Mercer St. 212-239-6200.)

RECKLESS

A revival of Craig Lucas's 1983 play stars Mary Louise Parker and Rosie Perez. (Reviewed in this issue.) (Biltmore, 261 W. 47th St. 212-239-6200.)

RICHARD III

Peter Dinklage plays the King in the Public's season opener. Directed by Peter DuBois. (Reviewed in this issue.) (425 Lafayette St. 212-239-6200. Through Oct. 24.)

SPATTER PATTERN

The ambiguously evil Tate (Darren Pettie), a New York professor suspected of killing one of his students, meets his neighbor Dunn (Peter Frechette), a writer who's been blocked since his partner died. The two make a morose and, at times, implausible pair, as each examines the role he may have played in one of the deaths. The playwright, Neal Bell, uses a gimmick that clouds the plot and sometimes stalls the action—when Dunn recalls his late boyfriend, he wavers between imagination and reality—but the director, Michael Greif ("Rent"), does an excellent job of recovering the pace. (Playwrights Horizons, 416 W. 42nd St. 212-279-4200. Through Oct. 24.)

STRING OF PEARLS

The premise of Michele Lowe's new play at Primary Stages—that a woman could lose a pearl necklace and find it again thirty years later—seems clichéd, but the charm and nuance of the writing make the fable believable and fresh. Eric Simonson directs. (59E59 Theatre, at 59 E. 59th St. 212-279-4200.)

THE TEMPTATION OF ST. ANTHONY

Robert Wilson and Bernice Johnson Reagon (of Sweet Honey in the Rock) collaborate on a musical production inspired by Flaubert's novel, starring Carl Hancock Rux and Helga Davis, backed by a fourteen-member vocal ensemble. (BAM's Howard Gilman Opera House, 30 Lafayette Ave. 718-636-4100. Through Oct. 24.)

TRYING

In a touching, traditional drama by Joanna McClelland Glass, a determined young Canadian secretary (Kati Brazda) with a passion for Wallace Stevens tries to straighten out the paperwork of a crotchety lawmaker, Francis Biddle (Fritz Weaver). Both characters are prickly: Biddle, an F.D.R.-era attorney general and a judge at the Nuremberg trials, has let old age and self-pity erode his democratic ideals; Sarah, the secretary, is overly sensitive and unbending. Their relationship develops through the precision and generosity of genuine speech between clever, self-protective people. Directed by Sandy Shinner. (Promenade, Broadway at 76th St. 212-239-6200.)

DANCE

AMERICAN BALLET THEATRE

The season begins with a ravishing selection of romantic ballet, including two works by Fokine: the nocturne from "Les Sylphides," danced by Julie Kent, Maxim Beloserkovsky, and Erica Cornejo, and "Le Spectre de la Rose," performed in its entirety by the company for the first time since 1980, with the powerful Herman Cornejo in the Nijinsky role, partnered by Xiomara Reyes. Another highlight of opening night: Alessandra Ferri kicks off her twentieth year with A.B.T. in several pas de deux from Jerome Robbins's "Other Dances" (set to mazurkas and a waltz by Chopin), performed with Angel Corella. The first week features the U.S. première of "VIII," Christopher Wheeldon's ballet about Henry VIII's first two wives, created for the Hamburg Ballet in 2001 and remade for A.B.T., and Trey McIntyre's "Pretty Good Year," set to a Dvořák piano trio and danced by Stella Abrera, Herman Cornejo, and several young standouts from the corps, notably the lovely Zhong-Jing Fang. The week also includes four performances of Antony Tudor's dramatic "Pillar of Fire." ♦ Oct. 20 at 7: "Les Sylphides," "Le Spectre de la Rose," "The Dying Swan," "Swan Lake" Act III pas de deux, "Le Corsaire" pas de deux, "Other Dances," and "Sinfonietta." ♦ Oct. 21 at 7:30: "Les Sylphides," "Pillar of Fire," and "Sinfonietta." ♦ Oct. 22 at 8: "Pretty Good Year," "VIII," "Petite Mort," and "Sechs Tänze." ♦ Oct. 23 at 2: "Les Sylphides," "Pillar of Fire," and "Theme and Variations." ♦ Oct. 23 at 8: "Pretty Good Year," "Pillar of Fire," "Petite Mort," and "Sechs Tänze." ♦ Oct. 24 at 2: "Pretty Good Year," "Pillar of Fire," "Petite Mort," and "Sechs Tänze." ♦ Oct. 24 at 7:30: "Theme and Variations," "Le Corsaire" pas de deux, "VIII," and "Sinfonietta." ♦ Oct. 26 at 7:30: "Pretty Good Year," "Le Spectre de la Rose," "Swan Lake" Act II pas de deux, "Le Corsaire" pas de deux, and "Amazed in Burning Dreams." (City Center, 131 W. 55th St. 212-581-1212. Through Nov. 7.)

"FOREVER TANGO"

Luis Bravo's evening of Argentine dance features fourteen dancers and an eleven-piece orchestra. The show has returned to the Shubert following a successful run this summer. (225 W. 44th St. 212-239-6200. Oct. 19, Oct. 21-22, and Oct. 26 at 8; Oct. 20 and Oct. 23 at 2 and 8; and Oct. 24 at 3. Through Nov. 28.)

"MANDANCE PROJECT"

Eliot Feld's Ballet Tech returns to the Joyce with three rotating programs well stocked with premières. The aesthetic is spare, with bare stages and shirtless dancers. Between them, Damian Woetzel, Sean Suozzi, and Wu-Kang Chen dance four of Feld's latest solos. In "Limbs," set to three Bach piano preludes, Chen at first keeps his feet planted, articulating the notes with his torso, before letting loose with flying circular sequences of leaps. In the final section, he clenches his fists and communicates only with his muscular arms. (175 Eighth Ave., at 19th St. 212-242-0800. Oct. 21-23 at 8 and Oct. 24 at 3. Through Nov. 7.)

BANGARRA DANCE THEATRE

The Australian troupe brings Aboriginal traditions into glossy, contemporary productions. The newest of these, "Bush," samples the imagery of indigenous creation myths, from praying-mantis stick spirits to slithering reptiles. Choreographed by Stephen Page and Frances Rings. (BAM's Harvey Theatre, 651 Fulton St., Brooklyn. 718-636-4100. Oct. 21-23 at 7:30.)

"COME HOME CHARLEY PATTON"

Ten years in the making, Ralph Lemon's "Geography Trilogy" started its candid cross-cultural questioning with "Geography" (1997), in which Lemon and another African-American dancer swapped styles with dancers from Africa. For "Tree" (2000), the second installment, Lemon used the same method with dancers from India, China, and Japan. For the final and most autobiographical section, which has its première this week, Lemon travelled to the Deep South, retracing his family history. Whether that trip was a homecoming or yet another journey through a foreign land is only one of many subjects under investigation—Delta blues legends, the civil-rights movement—in an oblique mix of fluent dance, documentary footage, and digital animation. (BAM's Harvey Theatre, 651 Fulton St., Brooklyn. 718-636-4100. Oct. 26 at 7:30. Through Oct. 30.)

"CAIN'S HAT"

Gábor Goda, the artistic director of the Hungarian dance troupe Artus, tackles the subjects of lawbreaking (by Cain), lawmaking (by Moses), and mythmaking (about God and hats) within an hour that blends visual art, myth, and a broad range of stage movement. Goda converts his grand themes into striking visuals: a man balances along the top of a colonnade of slender poles, another man stacks irregular stones one by one in a precarious pile, and the narrator sings a-cappella songs on stilts. (The Kitchen, 512 W. 19th St. 212-255-5793. Oct. 20-21 and Oct. 23 at 8 and Oct. 22 at noon and 8.)

MONICA BILL BARNES

The centerpiece of the choreographer's "The Happy Dance (or What Started Out OK)" is a duet for Barnes and Tami Stronach. Set in the creepy, absurdist terrain of Lynch land (though Barnes credits Brecht), the dancing is methodical and charged with repression. As Barnes and Stronach repeat a looping pattern of synchronized breathing, fast-paced aerobics, and ballroom partnering that ends, each time, in retreat, a trio of manic, snapping showgirls appear and reappear onstage, beating their fists on their thighs. Ignoring the duet and the trio, a group of aimless but elegant elderly people promenade throughout the evening, accompanied by accordion. (St. Mark's In-the-Bowery, Second Ave. at 10th St. 212-674-8194. Oct. 21-24 at 8:30.)

"DEADMANDANCING EXCESS"

The choreographer and dancer Koosil-ja explores the human fascination with death in a provocative evening-length dance set to murder scenes in movies. (Performing Garage, 33 Wooster St. 212-375-0186. Oct. 21-23 at 9.)

"DANCE RITUALS OF KERALA, INDIA"

In ancient rituals called *theyyams*, rarely observed in the West, men assume the shape of Hindu deities and dance out myths, underscored by a hypnotic battery of drums. A troupe of dancers culled from villages along India's Malabar Coast, directed by Ravi Gopalan Nair, appear in New York for the first time, presented by the World Music Institute. The saturated color and outsized dimensions of the headdresses and costumes create a stunning impression, and the conviction the performers bring to their spinning and swordplay could make a believer of anyone. (Symphony Space, Broadway at 95th St. 212-864-5400. Oct. 24 at 3 and 8.)

"LA MÁQUINA DEL TIEMPO"

Merián Soto Dance and Performance makes heady use of Latin ballroom forms. The conceit of Soto's new work is that dance functions as a time machine—the "Máquina del Tiempo" of the title—and that muscle memory connects different eras. Although the choreography doesn't take that idea far enough, and the comparison with projected dance footage from the forties isn't always flattering, Soto effectively showcases the suave stylings of her trio of dancers and an elegant Cuban duo of musicians. (Dance Theatre Workshop, 219 W. 19th St. 212-924-0077. Oct. 20-23 at 7:30. Through Oct. 30.)

"SATURDAY BALLROOM DANCING"

The autumn series at the 92nd Street Y begins with a lesson in ballroom, taught by staff members from the Sandra Cameron Dance Center, followed by social dancing—swing, salsa, rumba, cha-cha, and more. The evening includes a dance tribute to Peter DiFalco, who has taught dance in New York since 1959 and is retiring this year. (Lexington Ave. at 92nd St. 212-431-1825. Oct. 23 at 7.)

NIGHT LIFE
CONCERTS

JAZZ AT LINCOLN CENTER

The organization opens its long-awaited new multivenue home to the public this week. Oct. 21 at 8: The actor and comedian **Bill Cosby** joins the **Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra** in Rose Theatre, a beautifully intimate horseshoe-shaped space that can seat more than a thousand people. Oct. 22-23 at 7:30: The Allen Room, which has a massive glass wall overlooking Central Park, presents "Speaking of Jazz . . .," a program that unites poetry and music. The performers include **Oscar Brown, Jr.**, **Sonia Sanchez**, **Yusef Komunyakaa**, **John Sinclair**, **Amiri Baraka**, **Gil Scott-Heron**, and a small band featuring the saxophonist **Sonny Fortune**. Oct. 22 at 8: **Cassandra Wilson**, the current queen of jazz divas, holds forth in Rose Theatre. Oct. 23 at 8: The singer **Dianne Reeves** shares the bill with the vocalist **Freddy Cole**. (Rose Theatre.) Oct. 25-27 at 8: Rose Theatre is the place for a three-part exploration of the blues. The first night finds **Taj Mahal**, **Randy Weston**, **Corey Harris**, **Abdou M'Boup**, and **Mamadou Diabate** exploring the genre's African roots. On the second, the fiddler and crossover expert **Mark O'Connor**, the bluegrass figurehead **Ricky Skaggs**, and the trombonist **Wycliffe Gordon** dig into country blues. On the final evening, the **Holmes Brothers**, **Marie Knight**, **Joey DeFrancesco**, and **Houston Person** stake a claim for rhythm and blues. (Broadway at 60th St. 212-721-6500. See also Dizzy's Club Coca-Cola, below.)

AL GREEN / MAVIS STAPLES

Last year, the great soul singer descended from the pulpit to spend time in the studio with his seventies producer Willie Mitchell. The resulting album, "I Can't Stop," didn't break any new ground, but Green's voice remains a form of salvation. The legendary gospel and soul singer Staples has just released her first album of new material in ten years, "Have a Little Faith." It leans more toward the blues than it does toward the funk of the seventies hits she recorded with her sisters. (Apollo Theatre, 253 W. 125th St. 212-531-5300. Oct. 21 at 8. ♦ Beacon Theatre, Broadway at 74th St. 212-307-7171. Oct. 23 at 8.)

DEATH CAB FOR CUTIE

This four-piece out of Bellingham, Washington, takes its name from an obscure track by the British comic surrealists the Bonzo Dog Band, and it favors dreamy, atmospheric pop full of poetic lyrics and artsy imagery. (Roseland, 239 W. 52nd St. 212-307-7171. Oct. 22 at 7:30.)

WORLD MUSIC INSTITUTE

Oct. 23 at 3 and 8: The **Yoshida Brothers** are two Japanese siblings who have taken the samisen, a banjo-like lute, to rock-star heights in their native land. They update the ancient music with pop, jazz, and world influences. Their compatriot **Akira Satake** opens the show with a traditional set of Appalachian banjo songs. (Thalia Theatre, Symphony Space, Broadway at 95th St.) Oct. 24 at 3 and 8: "Dance Rituals of Kerala, India" (see Dance). (Symphony Space.) (For more information about both shows, call 212-545-7536.)

"NO MINIMUM"

A night of duets with two accomplished mainstream jazz pianists: the long-established stylist **Cedar Walton** and the versatile **Bruce Barth.** (Merkin Concert Hall, 129 W. 67th St. 212-501-3330. Oct. 25 at 8.)

THE SIDNEY BECHET SOCIETY

The trumpeter **Randy Sandke** leads a group that includes the pianist **Derek Smith,** the vocalist **Yvette Glover,** and the trombonist **Wycliffe Gordon.** (The Lighthouse, 111 E. 59th St. For more information, call 516-627-4468. Oct. 25 at 8:15.)

CLUBS

Musicians and night-club proprietors live complicated lives; it's advisable to call ahead to confirm engagements.

B. B. KING BLUES CLUB & GRILL

237 W. 42nd St. (212-997-4144)—Oct. 19-20: **Ministry** started off as a dance-oriented synth-pop act some twenty years ago. By the late eighties, they were experimenting with industrial music and heavy metal, and they became ferocious live performers known for dissonance, gloom, and shock. Though their albums have sometimes found them stranded without any new ideas, they still make a disarming mechanized racket in concert. Oct. 22-23: **Tower of Power** continues to ask, "What Is Hip?"

BOWERY BALLROOM

6 Delancey St. (212-533-2111)—Oct. 23: **Mouse on Mars** is Jan St. Werner and Andi Toma, two electronic-music wizards from Düsseldorf who, over the course of eight albums during the past decade, have taken great pleasure in expanding the scope of their chosen genre.

IRVING PLAZA

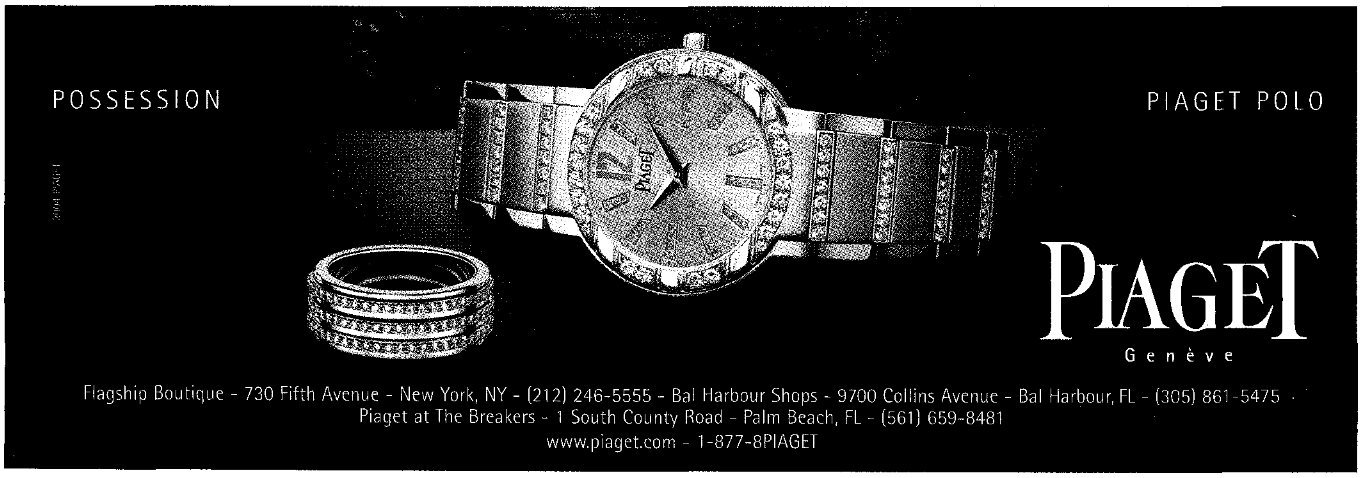
17 Irving Pl., at 15th St. (212-777-6800)—Oct. 23-24: For more than a decade, **Galactic** has been weaving modern and retrospective influences into a danceable blend of jazz, funk, rock, and fusion. Its charismatic vocalist, Theryl (the Houseman) De Clouet, recently left the band, but the New Orleans-based ensemble continues to perform its extended, energetic instrumental improvisations.

LIVING ROOM

154 Ludlow St. (212-533-7235)—Oct. 26: **Eleni Mandell.** This Los Angeles favorite was weaned on artists like Tom Waits and X, and she favors dark and sexy songs. Her latest album, "Afternoon," is full of lovelorn narratives that she delivers with a soft-focus voice. Monday nights: The guitarist **Jim Campilongo** holds court.

MERCURY LOUNGE

217 E. Houston St. (212-260-4700)—Oct. 22: The **Section Quartet** takes a night off from backing the singer Sam Phillips for a show of its own music, or rather, the music of the rock canon—this group



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plays string instrumental versions of Led Zeppelin, Tool, and Radiohead. Here they'll be performing the entirety of Radiohead's album "OK Computer." Oct. 25-26: The intensely trippy soundscapes of the **Brian Jonestown Massacre.**

SATALLA
37 W. 26th St. (212-576-1155)—Oct. 21: **Las Rubias del Norte** rearrange Cuban big-band music for a handful of instruments, including the glockenspiel. Oct. 22: The traditional Irish sounds of **Danú.** Oct. 24: **Andre Thierry & Zydeco Magic** break out the washboards and accordions.

S.O.B.'S
204 Varick St., at W. Houston St. (212-243-4940)—**Wyclef Jean,** the Haitian-born, Brooklyn-raised hip-hop star, recently returned to the borough of his youth for a much talked about outdoor Fugees reunion show. As a solo artist, he's set himself apart from the other distinguished alumni of that group by embracing a wide-ranging musical sensibility and a political consciousness. He celebrates the release of his new album, "Welcome to Haiti: Creole 101," on Oct. 25.

JAZZ AND STANDARDS

ALGONQUIN HOTEL
59 W. 44th St. (212-840-6800)—Oct. 19-23: **Jeremy Davenport,** a New Orleans-based trumpeter and singer whose boyish good looks call to mind the young Chet Baker, is carving out his own spot in the space between jazz and cabaret.

BLUE NOTE
131 W. 3rd St., near Sixth Ave. (212-475-8592)—Through Oct. 24: More than a decade after the death of their inspiration, the Dizzy Gillespie Alumni All Stars remain a going concern. The star soloists **Roy Hargrove, James Moody, Slide Hampton,** and **Benny Green** will be joined by the altoist **Jackie McLean** on Oct. 19-21 and the venerable brassman **Clark Terry** on Oct. 22-23.

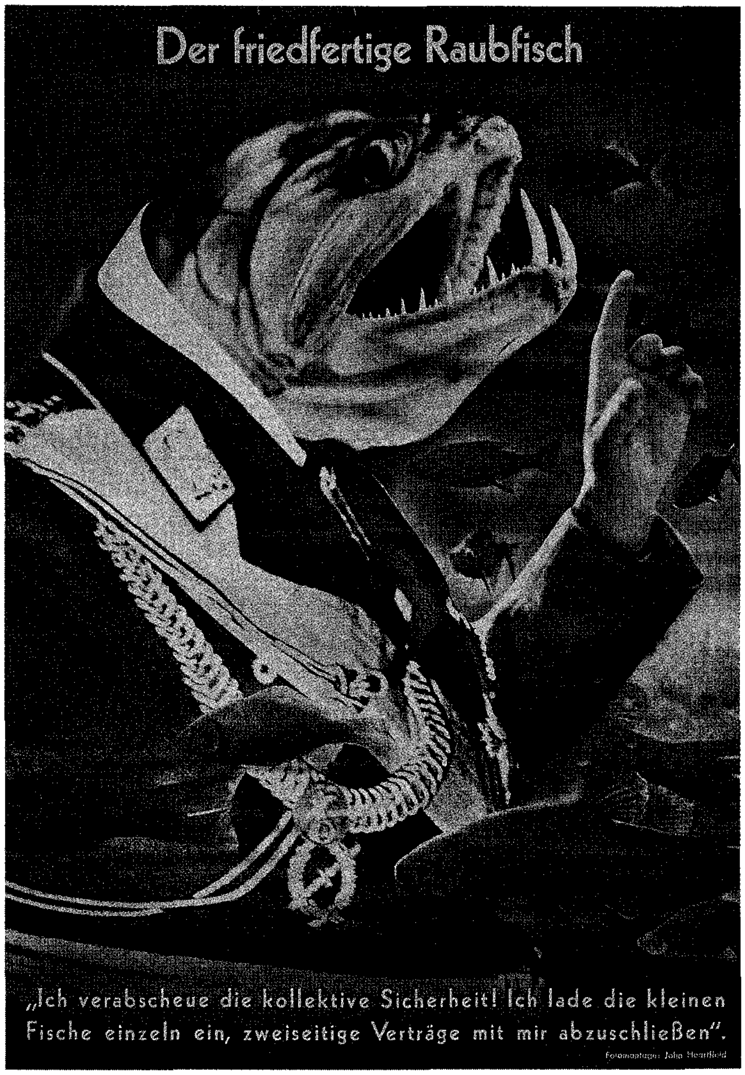
DIZZY'S CLUB COCA-COLA
Broadway at 60th St. (212-258-9595)—The new night club inside Jazz at Lincoln Center's Columbus Circle home is a small, sleek space with curved bamboo walls and a view of Central Park. It will be open seven nights a week. The pianist **Bill Charlap** and his crackerjack trio, along with the saxophonist **Charles McPherson** and the trumpeter **Nicholas Payton,** are here Oct. 21-24, taking a new look at Gillespie's compositions and old favorites.

IRIDIUM
1650 Broadway, at 51st St. (212-582-2121)—Oct. 19-21: The **Jean-Michel Pilc** trio. This young French expatriate is as splashy as they come, turning each piano excursion into a joyride of fractured rhythms and wayward harmonies. Thankfully, he has a loyal bass-and-drum team who anticipate his every unexpected move. Oct. 22-24: **Helen Merrill,** an understated vocalist who has yet to achieve the fame she deserves, has a deeply expressive delivery that has enthralled vocal mavens since the early fifties. Mondays belong to the electric-guitar innovator **Les Paul.**

LE JAZZ AU BAR
41 E. 58th St. (212-308-9455)—Through Oct. 31: The elegant vocalist **Karen Akers** personifies New York cabaret, but she shuns chestnuts in favor of imaginatively programmed evenings. Here she returns to "Time After Time," the program of Sondheim, Porter, Arlen, and Lerner and Lowe songs she performed earlier this year to such great effect at the Algonquin.

JAZZ STANDARD
116 E. 27th St. (212-576-2232)—Oct. 19-24: The pianist **Fred Hersch** has great faith in the power of the jazz duet. His partners in lyrical intimacy include the Dutch-based saxophonist and clarinettist **Michael Moore** (Oct. 19), the trumpeter **Dave Douglas** (Oct. 20), the mainstream-piano giant **Kenny Barron** (Oct. 21), the bassist **John Pattitucci** (Oct. 22), the singer **Nancy King** (Oct. 23), and the saxophonist **Joel Frahm** (Oct. 24).

VILLAGE VANGUARD
178 Seventh Ave. S., at 11th St. (212-255-4037)—**Jim Hall** is the reigning master of the jazz guitar. This poetic player says more with fewer notes than any living improviser. The pianist **Geoff Keezer** joins his trio through Oct. 24. The **Vanguard Jazz Orchestra** holds sway on Mondays.


Der friedfertige Raubfisch
„Ich verabscheue die kollektive Sicherheit! Ich lade die kleinen Fische einzeln ein, zweiseitige Verträge mit mir abzuschließen".
Fotomontage: John Heartfield

A John Heartfield collage in "Comic Grotesque," at the Neue Galerie.

ART
MUSEUMS AND LIBRARIES

METROPOLITAN MUSEUM
Fifth Ave. at 82nd St. (212-879-5500)—Spanish conquistadores arrived in what is now Peru in 1532 and promptly executed Atahualpa, the Incan emperor. In 1545, they discovered the most concentrated deposit of silver ever unearthed. The next few centuries witnessed an intense and productive clash between indigenous craftsmanship and iconography and those of the Catholic church and European courts. **"The Colonial Andes: Tapestries and Silverwork 1530-1830"** focusses on weavings—featuring native symbols like the puma and butterfly mixed with imported mermaids and unicorns—and such a treasury of silver artifacts that entire galleries seem encased in gleaming foil. Through Dec. 12. ♦ **"George Washington: Man, Myth, Monument."** Through Feb. 27. ♦ **"Gilbert Stuart."** Opens Oct. 21. ♦ **"Romare Bearden at the Met."** Through March 6. ♦ **"China: Dawn of a Golden Age, 200-750 A.D."** Through Jan. 23. ♦ **"All That Glitters Is Not Gold: The Art, Form, and Function of Gilt Bronze in the French Interior."** Through Feb. 20. ♦ **"German Drawings and Prints from the Weimar Republic (1919-33)."** Through Oct. 31. (Open Tuesdays through Sundays, 9:30 to 5:30, and Friday and Saturday evenings until 9.)

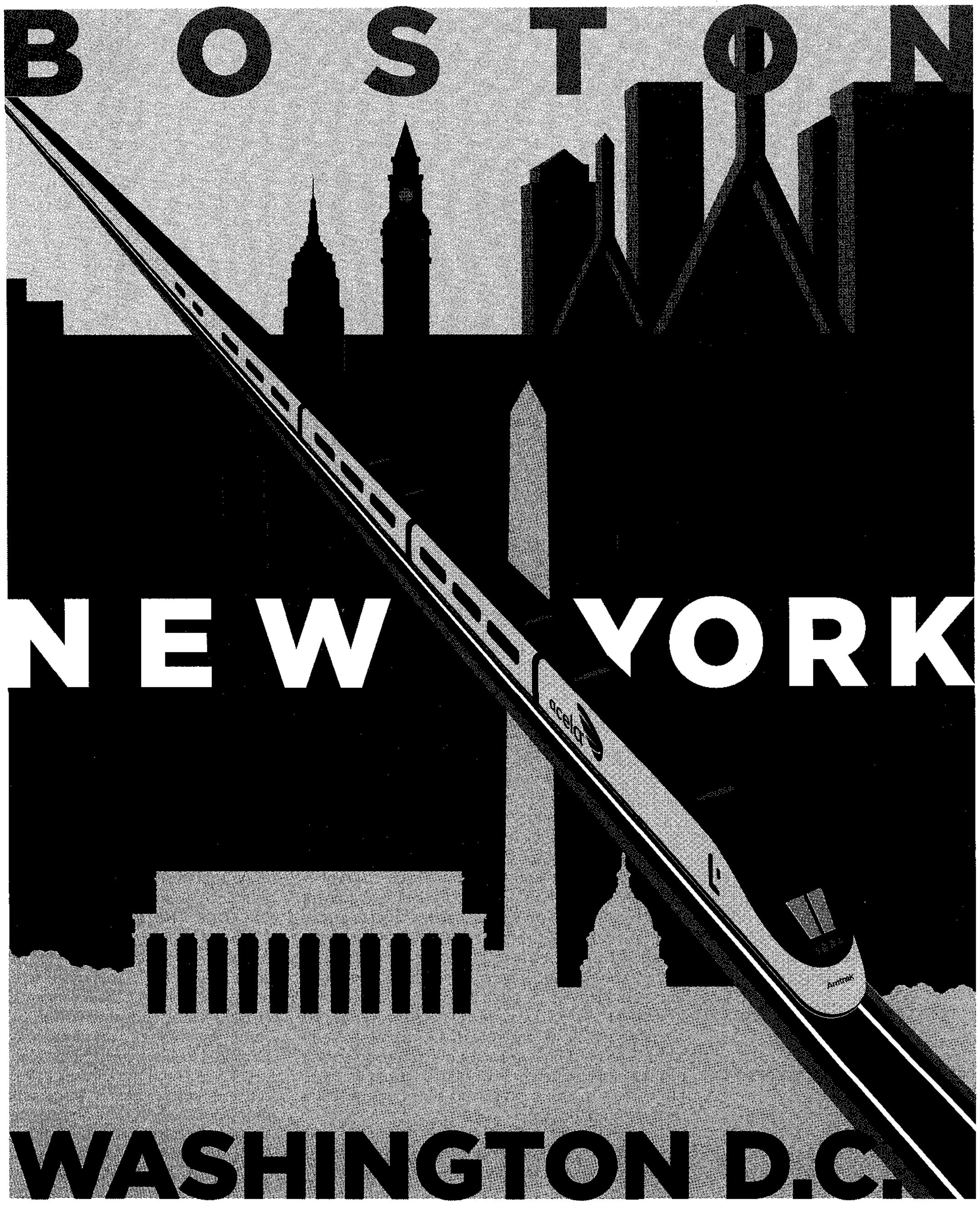
MUSEUM OF MODERN ART
The museum is closed until Nov. 20, when it will reopen in its renovated and expanded building, at 11 W. 53rd Street.

GUGGENHEIM MUSEUM
Fifth Ave. at 89th St. (212-423-3500)—**"The Aztec Empire."** Through Feb. 13. ♦ **"Kandinsky Gallery: An Inaugural Selection."** Through May 11. (Open Saturdays through Wednesdays, 10 to 5:45, and Fridays, 10 to 8.)

WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART
Madison Ave. at 75th St. (212-570-3676)—**"The Art of Romare Bearden."** Through Jan. 25. ♦ Jacob Lawrence's **"War Series."** Through Jan. 31. ♦ **"Jennifer Pastor: The Perfect Ride."** Through Jan. 2. ♦ **"War! Protest in America, 1965-2004,"** a program of documentary films screening daily. Through Oct. 24. ♦ **"Memorials of War."** Through Nov. 28. (Open Wednesdays, Thursdays, and weekends, 11 to 6, and Fridays, 1 to 9.)

COOPER-HEWITT NATIONAL DESIGN MUSEUM
Fifth Ave. at 91st St. (212-849-8300)—Legendary as a teacher at the Bauhaus and later at Black Mountain College and Yale, Josef Albers preached an aesthetic credo of simple, precise geometries and harmonious color relationships. His wife, Anni, often considered the preëminent textile artist of the twentieth century, was Albers's co-visionary and teaching partner for some fifty years. Combining furniture, glass, metalwork, and a fantastic series of album covers designed by Josef with tapestries and upholstery by Anni, **"Josef and Anni Albers: Designs for Living"** presents a primer on the couple's intertwined careers, and thereby a short course in high modernism. Through Feb. 27. ♦ **"Design ≠ Art: Functional Objects from Donald Judd to Rachel Whiteread."** Through Feb. 27. ♦ **"Faster, Cheaper, Newer, More: Revolutions of 1848."** Through Jan. 9. (Open Tuesdays through Thursdays, 10 to 5; Fridays, 10 to 9; Saturdays, 10 to 6; and Sundays, noon to 6.)

JEWISH MUSEUM
Fifth Ave. at 92nd St. (212-423-3200)—Amid the terrors and deprivations of the Terezin concentration camp, children were given lessons in art, where they were taught to draw with bold, expressive shapes and synesthetic color choices. The teacher was their fellow-prisoner Friedl Dicker-Brandeis: a student of Johannes Itten and Paul Klee at the Bauhaus, then a designer and painter in Vienna and Berlin, she produced textiles, furniture, costumes, and stage sets, as well as tender, incisive portraits of her intimates. Examples of all are on view, as are some of the five thousand children's drawings Dicker-Brandeis hid in her suitcases, discovered after she was killed, in 1944. Reflecting intensive original research, **"Innovator,**



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Activist, Healer: The Art of Friedl Dicker-Brandeis" is crushingly sad, of course. But you walk out with colors singing in your head. Through Jan. 16. (Open Sundays through Wednesdays, 11 to 5:45; Thursdays, 11 to 8; and Fridays, 11 to 3.)

NEUE GALERIE
1048 Fifth Ave., at 86th St. (212-628-6200)—**"Comic Grotesque: Wit and Mockery in German Art, 1870-1940"** includes humorous work by artists like Hannah Höch, Paul Klee, and Emil Nolde. There's also a room devoted to the films of Karl Valentin, the onetime vaudevillian who called himself "Munich's skinniest comedian." Through Feb. 14. (Open Fridays, 11 to 9, and Saturdays through Mondays, 11 to 6.)

NEW-YORK HISTORICAL SOCIETY
170 Central Park W., at 77th St. (212-873-3400)—**"Alexander Hamilton: The Man Who Made Modern America."** Through Feb. 28. ♦ **"If Elected: Campaigning for the Presidency"** and **"Campaigns on Cotton."** Through Nov. 3. (Open Tuesdays through Sundays, 10 to 6.)

GALLERIES-UPTOWN

Unless otherwise noted, galleries are open Tuesdays through Saturdays, from around 10 or 11 to between 5 and 6.

KATHERINE BOWLING
One of the secrets to Bowling's gorgeous paintings is their surfaces. Spackle is laid over wood and then sanded down, creating a textured base that mimics the plaster walls of Renaissance frescoes. On top of this she paints landscapes in oil, mostly of upstate New York: meadows and trees leaning over roads that curve and disappear into the horizon, an explosion of blossoms in an orchard, the sky clearing over a grassy plain, a country road covered with snow. The light veers from golden to deep-blue dusk. Paint caked in the hand-weathered surfaces creates the illusion of a veil, as if you were viewing the world through haze or a rain-streaked window. Through Oct. 30. (Greenberg Van Doren, 730 Fifth Ave. 212-445-0444.)

Short List

LESTER JOHNSON
James Goodman, 41 E. 57th St. 212-593-3737.
Through Oct. 30.

BEN NICHOLSON
Jacobson Howard, 19 E. 76th St. 212-570-2362.
Through Oct. 23.

BRIDGET RILEY
Pace Wildenstein, 32 E. 57th St. 212-421-3292.
Through Oct. 23.

GALLERIES-CHELSEA

MIROSLAW BALKA
Flickering video projections of deer frolicking in the snow and a pond in winter sound like lovely, postcard-worthy scenes. Balka couldn't agree more. He even calls one "Winterreise (Bambi, Bambi, Pond)." Only, he's obliged to tell us that these bucolic winter vistas were shot at the Brzezinka concentration camp, in Poland. Objects flanking the videos—a plate on a spinning table, blue circles of flame from a gas stove projected onto beds of salt, and a rotating roof-like structure—recall the talismans of Joseph Beuys. In the dim light of the gallery, they're also like church icons—perfect for a show weighted with sombre history, and for an artist who grew up in Catholic Poland and whose grandfather sculpted funerary monuments. Through Oct. 23. (Gladstone, 515 W. 24th St. 212-206-9300.)

IONA ROZEAL BROWN
Brown's style of painting originated several years ago with a trip to Japan, where she saw local teen-agers adopting and imitating American street culture. She started making acrylic works on paper in the style of ukiyo-e prints; they would look like Edo-period artifacts except for the fact that the geishas sport cornrows, wield hair picks, and smoke blunts, and the samurai grab their crotches. Some are in actual blackface. Sprinkled through the images are little anime-inspired larval figures she calls W.O.I.M.S., "Weapons of Incoherent Mass Spending." The paintings are hilarious, but sometimes skirt awfully close to gimmickry, or facile cultural critique. Through Oct. 23. (Caren Golden, 539 W. 23rd St. 212-727-8304.)

RICHARD LONG
The British nature walker's floor sculptures of collected and arrayed stones and his pictorial surfaces finger-painted with riverine mud have always been awfully tasteful, but this show reaches the point of genteel décor. Mud pictures on fine plywood predominate. Besides deploying his familiar donut motif, Long has used masking tape to yield sharp-edged, right-angled shapes made up of mannerly splotches and slathers. Some works sport neatly ranked thumbprints. The formal variety induces a sense of debilitating arbitrariness, in which the one constant is beige-toned elegance. This rock artist has gone easy-listening. Through Oct. 23. (Sperone Westwater, 415 W. 13th St. 212-999-7337.)

BEATRIZ MILHAZES
Paintings by the Brazilian artist. (see This Week). Opens Oct. 23. (Cohan, 533 W. 26th St. 212-714-9500.)

TONY OURSLER
In this group of new paintings and collages, disembodied mouths or eyes, floating about the world on their own recognizance, quickly become objects of comic horror. The features are set adrift in pools of green-and-silver or orange-and-purple pointillist paint; they seem at once alive and dead. Oursler's better-known video-based sculptures make similar use of body parts removed from their usual contexts, and these drawings—abjectly jolly though they are—don't add much new to the theme. Through Oct. 30. (Lehmann Maupin, 540 W. 26th St. 212-255-2923.)

JULIANNE SWARTZ
Swartz's constructions, made of PVC pipe, Mylar, magnets, fiber-optic cable, and wee amplifiers, wrap around the gallery, inviting the viewer to peer into mirrored periscope openings or listen for the music in a motorized metronome. The sculptures are deliberately fragile, even precious, but they effect some genuinely surprising perceptual displacements, and the silvery, transparent materials have a whizbang chic. Through Oct. 23. (Bienvenu, 529 W. 20th St. 212-206-0297.)

Short List

RACKSTRAW DOWNES
Cunningham, 541 W. 25th St. 212-242-2772.
Through Oct. 30.

UGO RONDINONE
Marks, 522 W. 22nd St. 212-243-0200.
Through Oct. 30.

SAM TAYLOR-WOOD
Marks, 523 W. 24th St. 212-243-0200.
Through Oct. 30.

TABLES FOR TWO

RUSSIAN SAMOVAR
256 W. 52nd St. (212-757-0168)—There are two main reasons people go to the Russian Samovar: to drink house-infused vodkas in semiprecious hues (horseradish, coriander, cranberry, pear, and many more) and to see Roman Kaplan, a gregarious and worldly native of St. Petersburg, who opened the restaurant nearly twenty years ago. (His friends Mikhail Baryshnikov and the late Joseph Brodsky both invested at some point.) Kaplan is one of those genial spirits who seem to know—or want to get to know—everyone. On a recent night, he paused at a table for a quick hello, then excused himself: he had to attend to the pair of Russian aristocrats sitting in the corner booth. When he returned, it was with a Martini, and there were introductions all around. After meeting one young lady at the table, he said, musingly, "Ah, Emily!" and seemed about to recite some verse, vast tracts of which he has reportedly memorized. Instead, he gave a little lesson on the samovar, the tea urn that was the centerpiece of every Russian table. He collects them, in brass and silver, and displays them around the place.

There is a murky glamour to the Samovar. Tasselled lampshades, absinthe green and cherry red, cast an intimate glow over every table and booth. This light is kind to the food, which is a little strange—which is to say, authentic. A violent-magenta cabbage-and-beet slaw accompanies Georgian lamb chops, and the plate of homemade pickles includes a grayish heirloom tomato, steeped in pungent, spicy brine. The fresh blini are heaven (even if the salmon is too dense and pink) and come with a gravy boat of sour cream. The pastry—in the vol-au-vent, the *pirozhok*, and the salmon *coulibiac*—is buttery and crisp, a perfect vehicle for the rich fillings. One of the most modest items, and one of the best, is the wild-mushroom soup. It is thick with porcini mushrooms and barley and served piping hot.

Among the celebrating Russians, clinking shot glasses and laughing darkly, there are always a few artists and writers. Some nights, there are poetry readings on the second floor. Even during these, the pianist, who bangs away at a white piano and belts out classic Russian tunes, finds it hard to keep his enthusiasm in check. (Open daily for dinner and Tuesdays through Sundays for lunch. Entrées $15-$32.)

—Dana Goodyear

GALLERIES-DOWNTOWN

LOUISE BOURGEOIS
Art's elder stateswoman (born in Paris in 1911) mines her memories of a bygone era. "Ode à l'Oubli" is a cloth book whose prototype was created from old blouses, lace, handkerchiefs—even one of her family's monogrammed napkins. It's an apt project for a woman whose parents' business was restoring tapestries. Craftspeople have painstakingly re-created the thirty-six "pages" in silk, nylon tricot, cotton, and crêpe de chine and mounted them on linen. The results are mostly graphic and abstract, but sometimes eerie texts creep in, like "I had a flashback of something that never existed." Through Nov. 13. (Peter Blum, 99 Wooster St. 212-343-0441.)

"BEFORE THE END (THE LAST PAINTING SHOW)"
The death of painting predicted in the sixties never came, of course. Collectors still had wall space to fill, and painters dodged the stalemate issued by late modernism. These endgame visions of painting offer a compelling view into the abyss, however. Several, like Douglas Huebler's corrugated "Untitled (Relief Painting)" (1964) and Jan Dibbets's 1967 stack of colored canvases, merge painting with sculpture. Ian Wilson's monochrome fibreglass-and-pigment "Red Square" (1966) marries painting with linguistics to deliver a Cold War-era joke. And Art and Language's "Untitled Painting" (1965), with two mirrors mounted on canvas, turns the epic question—to paint, or not to paint—back on the viewer. Through Oct. 23. (Swiss Institute, 495 Broadway. 212-925-2035.)

PHOTOGRAPHY

LYNN DAVIS
Davis, who is best known for her refined, large-scale, black-and-white photographs of icebergs, pyramids, and monuments toned with selenium and gold, has gone in a new direction for this show. She used color film and made forty-inch-square ink-jet prints that she manipulated digitally, using both positive and negative images in a palette that ranges from deep black through several tones of blue and into gray. The photographs mainly have to do with space exploration, including views of an abandoned launch site in Kazakhstan, a platform at the Kennedy Space Center, in Florida, and an actual satellite launch in French Guiana. The architecture of the blueish scaffolding, cranes, towers, walkways, and girders is

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rendered formally, and could be intimidatingly cold, but the way the ink falls on the fine German watercolor paper makes the surface of the prints strangely soft and painterly. Through Oct. 30. (Houk, 745 Fifth Ave. 212-750-7070.)

TIM DAVIS
"My Life in Politics" is a look at the banality of American political life. At a fast-food restaurant, Davis found a mural with various depictions of Martin Luther King, Jr., that boldly declares "One People, One Nation, One Taco, One Destiny." After being told that he couldn't use his tripod in the museum at the Nixon birthplace, in San Clemente, California, he instead photographed an iridescent oil stain in the parking lot. The tone is set with the first picture, a ripped and peeling Gilbert Stuart portrait of George Washington; the show concludes with a series of details of statues called "Founding Fathers' Crotches." Through Nov. 5. (Bohen Foundation, 415 W. 13th St. 212-414-4575.)

CANDIDA HÖFER
There is a subtle shift toward flesh and blood in Höfer's new architectural interiors. These large color prints—like her clinical depictions of lobbies and lunchrooms—depict ornate Venetian palaces and libraries and museums in the Netherlands. The spaces are devoid of people (except for a subtle self-portrait taken in a mirror at the Palazzo Zenobia), but the elaborate frescoes, classical statuary, and furniture give the vast rooms a human feel. Through Oct. 30. (Sonnabend, 536 W. 22nd St. 212-627-1018.)

AN-MY LÊ
Black-and-white photographs of scrubby hills pounded by mortar fire, U.S. Marines scanning the horizon, convoys of Humvees snaking along dusty trails, soldiers bivouacking among their jeeps in the desert. Could be Iraq or Afghanistan, but it's just Twenty-Nine Palms, California, where the Marines train to go to more dangerous places. There's a conceptual disconnect here. Lê is a Vietnamese immigrant who arrived in the United States in 1975 with her family at another Marine base in California, Camp Pendleton. In an earlier project, she photographed reënactments of episodes in the war in Vietnam. Through Oct. 23. (Murray Guy, 453 W. 17th St. 212-463-7372.)

DAVID WOJNAROWICZ
Wojnarowicz made the "Rimbaud in New York" series in 1978 and 1979, twelve years before he died of AIDS. These small black-and-white pictures show a man—maybe Wojnarowicz himself, maybe not—wearing a paper mask made from a copy of the only known photograph of Rimbaud. Wandering through the meatpacking district, Coney Island, and the old Forty-second Street of hustlers and porno theatres, Wojnarowicz's *poète maudite* smokes cigarettes and wears a jaunty scarf. No one on the street or in the subway seems to notice this ghost in their midst, and many pictures show "Rimbaud" alone in decrepit buildings—holding a gun, masturbating, or simply lying around. Through Oct. 30. (Roth Horowitz, 160A E. 70th St. 212-717-9067.)

Short List

ERNESTO BAZAN
The Italian Academy, Columbia University,
1161 Amsterdam Ave. 212-854-2316.
Through Oct. 24.

ALESSANDRA SANGUINETTI
Milo, 552 W. 24th St. 212-414-0370.
Through Oct. 23.

RAGHUBIR SINGH
Sepia, 148 W. 24th St. 212-645-9444.
Through Dec. 30.

AUCTIONS AND ANTIQUES

SOTHEBY'S
Oct. 21 at 2 and Oct. 22 at 10:15 A.M.: A wide-ranging sale of English furniture, ceramics, silver, and decorative arts. ♦ Oct. 22 at 2: English furniture from the stunning collection of Theodore and Ruth Baum. The Baums had a deep fascination with lion masks (an especially prominent motif during the George II period), which can be found here on a large wooden cabinet, carved chairs, and a walnut-veneered card table, among other items. ♦ Oct. 23 at 10:15 A.M.: A remarkable Louis XVI ormolu-mounted table, designed by Jean-François Leleu and heralded as an early, important specimen of Parisian neoclassicism, heads this auction from the collection of Marella Agnelli. The sale also features various pieces of Continental and Russian royal furniture (including armchairs from the Pavlosk Palace) and a treasure trove of Russian porcelain. ♦ Oct. 26 at 10:15 A.M. and 2: In a sale of (mostly French) nineteenth-century European art, the hushed mystery of Hammershoi's "Interior" and the serene high spirits of Breton's "Return of the Harvesters" counteract the pomp and grandeur of such works as Gérôme's "The Reception of the Grand Condé at Versailles" (expected to bring approximately a million dollars). (York Ave. at 72nd St. 212-606-7000.)

CHRISTIE'S
Oct. 19 at 10 A.M.: Like two characters in a Marlene Dietrich movie, the collectors and philanthropists Cornelius Ruxton Love and Audrey B. Love, née Josephthal, met on a boat from Shanghai to Tianjin in 1926. She was a niece of Solomon R. Guggenheim and a Smith graduate, on her way to her sister's wedding; he was a young diplomat at the American Embassy in China. This week at Christie's is dominated by a two-day sale of pieces from their collection; the opening session features jewelry fit for an heiress, including a late-eighteenth-century "cluster" necklace of diamonds and rubies. ♦ Oct. 19 at 10:45 A.M.: English Regency pieces in silver gilt (including a nine-light candelabrum in the shape of Hercules slaying the Hydra, made by Edward Farrell for the Duke of York) and Imperial Russian objets d'art from the Love collection. ♦ Oct. 20 at 10 A.M. and 2: An eclectic selection of furniture, Asian decorative art works, and antiquities (including an alabaster figure of a Roman emperor in the guise of a pharaoh from the first or second century A.D.) from the Loves' triplex on Park Avenue. ♦ Oct. 21 at 10 A.M. and 2:

"After an Accident, Grand Trunk Road, Bihar, 1991," by Raghubir Singh, from a retrospective at Sepia.

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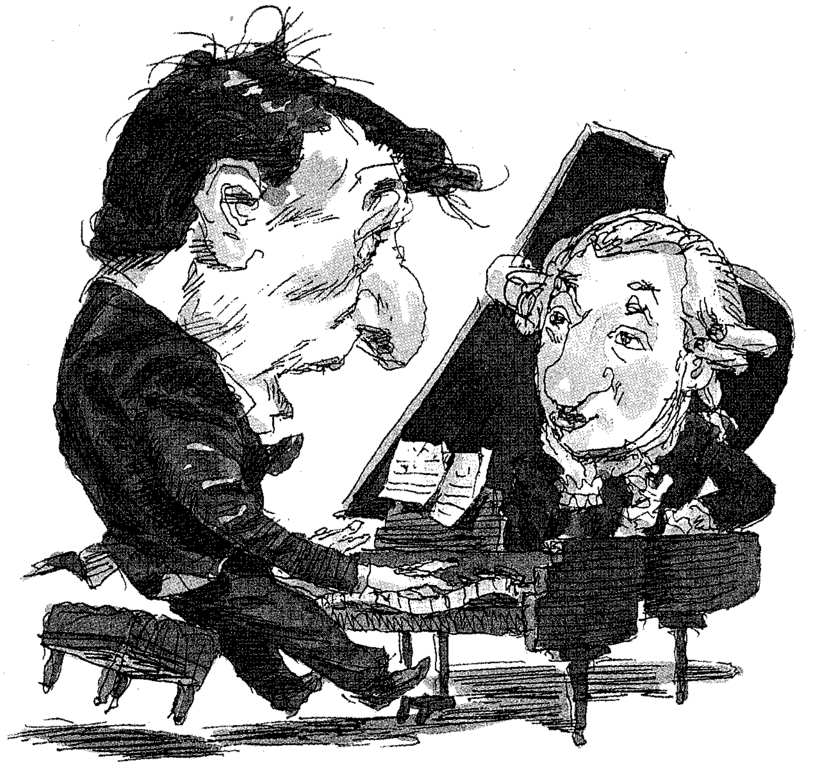
SWANN

Oct. 21 at 1: The December 2, 1806, edition of the *National Intelligencer* (one of only two copies known to exist), in which Thomas Jefferson announced the return of the Lewis and Clark expedition, is among a group of sixteen lots documenting the explorers' travels, the highlight of a sale of printed and manuscript Americana. (104 E. 25th St. 212-254-4710.)

GRAMERCY PARK ANTIQUES SHOW

A hundred American and European exhibitors offer a range of furniture, art works, and decorations. (69th Regiment Armory, Lexington Ave. at 26th St. 212-255-0020. Oct. 22-24.)



Robert Levin plays and discusses music by Mozart at Weill Recital Hall on Oct. 21.

JOHN CUNEO

CLASSICAL MUSIC

OPERA

METROPOLITAN OPERA

Oct. 20 and Oct. 23 at 8 and Oct. 26 at 7:30: Sonja Frisell's 1988 staging of **"Aida,"** the crown jewel among the Met's more conservative productions, uses breathtaking sets and resplendent costumes to create a world that matches the grandeur and mystery of Verdi's music—and transcends the star power of any particular cast. This year's roster includes Fiorenza Cedolins (in the title role), Dolora Zajick, Franco Farina, and Juan Pons; Marcello Viotti conducts. ♦ Oct. 21 at 7:30: Julie Taymor's production of **"Die Zauberflöte,"** with Nicole Heaston, Erika Miklosa, Matthew Polenzani, Rodion Pogossov, Julien Robbins, and Kwangchul Youn; Julius Rudel. (Reviewed in this issue.) ♦ Oct. 22 and Oct. 25 at 8: The company brings **"La Bohème"** back to the repertory with a promising cast that includes Ruth Ann Swenson, Ainhoa Arteta, Marcelo Álvarez, and Peter Mattei; Daniel Oren. ♦ Oct. 23 at 1:30: The up-and-coming Russian mezzo-soprano Marina Domashenko assumes the title role in **"Carmen,"** with Fabio Armiliato singing Don José, Maureen O'Flynn as Micaëla, and Louis Otey as Escamillo; Plácido Domingo. (Metropolitan Opera House. 212-362-6000.)

NEW YORK CITY OPERA

Oct. 21 at 7:30 and Oct. 23 at 1:30: With memories of the Met's John Dexter production of **"Dialogues of the Carmelites"** still lingering favorably in the minds of hundreds of New York operagoers, City Opera makes its own claim to Poulenc's melodramatic masterpiece. Rinat Shaham (as Blanche), Gwynne Geyer, Joyce Castle (as the Old Prioress), Eugenie Grunewald, Sarah Coburn, Matthew Chellis, and Jake Gardner are featured in the ensemble cast of Tazewell Thompson's production, which débuted at Glimmerglass in 2003; George Manahan conducts. ♦ Oct. 22 at 8 and Oct. 24 at 1:30: The John Copley production of **"The Marriage of Figaro"** returns, with Sharon Rostorf-Zamir (making her début, in the role of Susanna), Orla Boylan, David Pittsinger, Paulo Szot, and Jan Opalach; Steven Mosteller. ♦ Oct. 23 at 8: The young soprano Maria Kanyova, a company star in Italian roles, more than holds her own as Violetta in **"La Traviata,"** bringing intense but unstrained projection to the party scenes and sharp yet tender focus in her intimate moments. Also with Eric Fennell (as Alfredo) and Grant Youngblood (as Germont); Ari Pelto. (New York State Theatre. 212-870-5570.)

ORCHESTRAS AND CHORUSES

ORCHESTRA OF ST. LUKE'S

The modern-instrument group goes Baroque under the informed leadership of Roger Norrington, who leads it in a suite from Purcell's "The Fairy Queen" along with Handel's "Water Music" and a selection of Handel arias (with the countertenor David Daniels as special guest). (Carnegie Hall. 212-247-7800. Oct. 21 at 8.)

MANNES SCHOOL OF MUSIC ORCHESTRA

David Hayes conducts the group in works by Beethoven, Elgar (the "Enigma" Variations), and Hindemith (the "Mathis der Mahler" Symphony). (Alice Tully Hall. 212-875-5050. Oct. 21 at 8.)

ORPHEUS

The conductorless chamber orchestra, usually best when thinking small, tests its limits with Brahms's "Haydn Variations" and Paul Chihara's new orchestration of Chopin's Piano Concerto No. 1 in E Minor (anchored by the firm musicianship of Garrick Ohlsson). (Carnegie Hall. 212-247-7800. Oct. 23 at 8.)

LUXEMBOURG PHILHARMONIC ORCHESTRA

The rich, ancient duchy (founded in 1354) has appointed a renowned innovator, Bramwell Tovey, to lead its fine orchestra, which makes its New York début with a program heightened by the infectious zest of the percussionist Evelyn Glennie (who plays a new marimba concerto by Bright Sheng and a transcription of Vivaldi's Piccolo Concerto No. 4). Music by Berlioz and Elgar (the "Enigma" Variations) completes the concert. (Avery Fisher Hall. 212-721-6500. Oct. 24 at 3.)

BOSTON SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

James Levine, never a man to do things by halves, brings his new orchestra back to his home base with a monster program—Mahler's Eighth Symphony, a work with a nickname ("Symphony of a Thousand") that it almost earns. Joining a preternaturally large B.S.O. and an offstage brass ensemble will be the American Boychoir, the Tanglewood Festival Chorus at full strength, and a raft of vocal soloists, including Jane Eaglen, Heidi Grant Murphy, Stephanie Blythe, and Ben Heppner; Carnegie Hall will extend its stage by twelve feet to accommodate them all. (212-247-7800. Oct. 25 at 8.)

ST. PETERSBURG PHILHARMONIC

In the first of three concerts, Hélène Grimaud joins Yuri Temirkanov and his orchestra in music by Prokofiev, Schumann (the Piano Concerto), and Rachmaninoff (the Symphonic Dances). (Carnegie Hall. 212-247-7800. Oct. 26 at 8.)

RECITALS

TRINITY CONCERTS: SO PERCUSSION

Lunchtime church concerts don't get hipper than this. The superb new percussion quartet performs music by Steve Reich (Part I of "Drumming") and David Lang ("The So-Called Laws of Nature," one of his keepers). (Trinity Church, Broadway at Wall St. Oct. 21 at 1. A contribution is suggested.)

"MOZART EXPLORED"

Robert Levin, the controversial pianist and Harvard musicologist, is the main man for Carnegie Hall's two-year celebration of Mozart. An engaging host, he teams up with some distinguished colleagues (such as the violist Kim Kashkashian) for an opening program that showcases some of the music that the composer wrote for his intimate colleagues (including the "Kegelstatt" Trio and the Piano Quartet in G Minor). (Weill Recital Hall. 212-247-7800. Oct. 21 at 7:30.)

BARGEMUSIC

Oct. 21-22 at 7:30: In two concerts, the cellist Peter Bruns and the pianist Christoph Berner traverse Beethoven's complete works for cello and piano. ♦ Oct. 23 at 7:30 and Oct. 24 at 4: The violinist Mark Peskanov joins Bruns and Berner in trios by Beethoven (the "Ghost") and Schubert (in B-Flat Major, Op. 99). (Fulton Ferry Landing, Brooklyn. 718-624-2083.)

MILLER THEATRE: "NANCARROW FOR TWO"

A four-concert tribute to the American maverick begins with a program by the Bugallo-Williams Piano Duo, who will attempt twelve of Nancarrow's fantastically polyrhythmic player-piano studies (along with Stravinsky's duo version of "The Rite of Spring"). (Columbia University, Broadway at 116th St. 212-854-7799. Oct. 21 at 8.)

ANDRÁS SCHIFF

If anyone can inject some life into Dvořák's relentlessly overplayed Piano Quintet, it is certainly this intense and elegant pianist; he teams up with Prague's Panocha Quartet, who also perform the two string quartets by Janáček. (Zankel Hall. 212-247-7800. Oct. 22 at 7:30.)

CHAMBER MUSIC SOCIETY OF LINCOLN CENTER

The bassist Edgar Meyer and the pianist Anne-Marie McDermott are featured in a program of music by Dvořák (the Piano Quintet and the String Quintet with Bass) and Tcherepnin. (Alice Tully Hall. 212-875-5788. Oct. 22 at 8 and Oct. 24 at 5.)

ANTHONY DEAN GRIFFEY

The young American tenor, a determined singer with a clarion voice, makes an overdue New York recital début with a big supporting cast of instrumentalists—including the composer-pianist André Previn, who will accompany Griffey in a group of his songs. The program also includes music by

Barber, Copland, Griffes, and Vaughan Williams ("On Wenlock Edge"). (Zankel Hall. 212-247-7800. Oct. 23 at 7:30.)

TOKYO STRING QUARTET
The group, in residence at the 92nd Street Y, begins its season with an evening of quartets by Eisler, Haydn, and Schoenberg ("Verklärte Nacht," with the violist and cellist of the Ying Quartet helping out). (Lexington Ave. at 92nd St. 212-415-5500. Oct. 23 at 8.)

"LOST SONGS OF A RHINELAND HARPER"
Sequentia, Benjamin Bagby's colorful and involving medieval-music band, performs eleventh-century songs from the Cambridge Manuscript at an ideal setting—the Cloisters. (Fort Tryon Park. 212-650-2290. Oct. 24 at 1 and 3.)

BROOKLYN FRIENDS OF CHAMBER MUSIC
The baritone Thomas Meglioranza, an unusually sensitive interpreter of English-language song, joins the Ensō Quartet in Barber's "Dover Beach" on a program that also includes quartets by Corigliano, Haydn (in D Major, Op. 20, No. 4), and Brahms. (Lafayette Avenue Presbyterian Church, 85 S. Oxford St., Brooklyn. Oct. 24 at 3. Tickets at the door.)

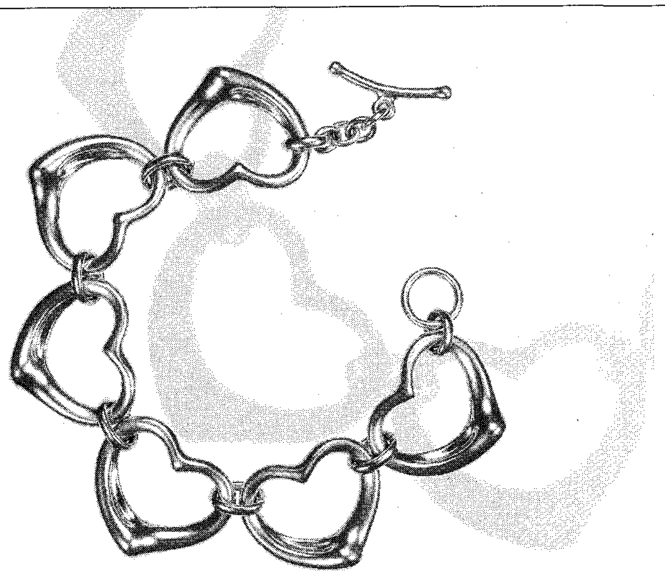
"THE BINDING OF ISAAC"
A talk on the legend of Abraham and Isaac, by the noted Biblical scholar Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg, precedes a performance of Britten's "Canticle II," a probing exploration of the same subject (featuring the tenor William Ferguson). (Great Hall, Cooper Union, Third Ave. at 7th St. 212-279-4200. Oct. 25 at 7:30.)

BACHANALIA: "AGNUS DEI"
In its first concert of the season, Nina Beilina's chamber ensemble performs music both meditative and celebratory by Bach, Schnittke, Hildegard of Bingen, and Brahms (the Piano Quartet in G Minor), with the pianist Vladimir Feltsman as special guest. (St. Peter's Church, Lexington Ave. at 54th St. 212-239-5906. Oct. 26 at 8.)

ABOVE AND BEYOND

READINGS
Oct. 20 at 6: Lawrence Weschler reads from "Vermeer in Bosnia: Cultural Comedies and Political Tragedies," his most recent collection. (Coliseum Books, 11 W. 42nd St. No tickets necessary.) ♦ Oct. 21 at 6: Going Coastal, a nonprofit waterfront advocacy group, celebrates its republication of "A Maritime History of New York," which was originally produced by writers for the Works Progress Administration in 1941. Barbara LaRocco, a founder of Going Coastal, will read from the book, and there will also be food and jazz music. (Pier 63 Maritime, the Hudson River at 23rd St. For more information, call 718-243-9056.) ♦ Oct. 22 at 7: Howard Zinn, Lili Taylor, Sarah Jones, John Sayles, Wallace Shawn, and others read from "Voices of a People's History of the United States," a newly published collection of speeches, letters, poems, and songs by Cesar Chavez, Frederick Douglass, Bob Dylan, and other American icons. (The New York Society for Ethical Culture, 2 W. 64th St., at Central Park W. For more information, call 212-226-8760.)

TALKS
Oct. 20 at 7:30: The *New Yorker* cartoonist David Sipress interviews his colleagues Roz Chast and Arnie Levin. (Dixon Place Veteran Series at the Marquee, 356 Bowery, at Great Jones St. 212-219-0736, ext. 106.) ♦ Oct. 23 from 9 to 5 and Oct. 24 from 9 to 2: The New York Institute for the Humanities presents "Us v. Them: The State of the Divide between Believers and Secularists," a two-day conference on constitutional, ethical, scientific, and religious perspectives. The participants include the playwright Tony Kushner, the biologist Richard Dawkins, the physicist Freeman Dyson, the philosopher Susan Neiman, and many others. (Tishman Auditorium, New York University Law School, 40 Washington Sq. S. For more information, call 212-998-2100.) ♦ Oct. 26 at 7:30: The poet Eamon Grennan discusses Emily Dickinson. (Hemmerdinger Hall, New York University, 100 Washington Sq. E. For more information, call 212-254-9628.)



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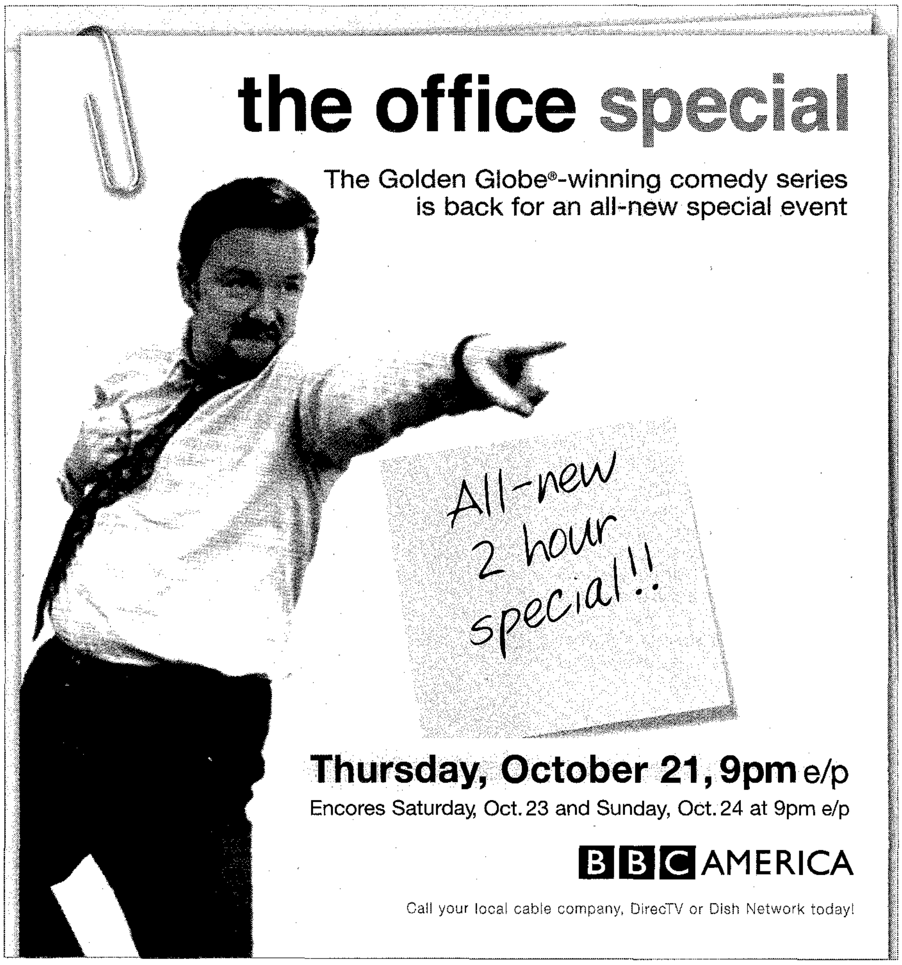

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MOVIES OPENING

FARMINGVILLE
A documentary about two Mexican day laborers who were assaulted in a Long Island town. Directed by Carlos Sandoval and Catherine Tambini. Opening Oct. 22. (Quad Cinema.)

FISH WITHOUT A BICYCLE
A struggling actress (Jenna Mattison) takes on the L.A. dating scene, in a comedy directed by Brian A. Green. Opening Oct. 22. (Quad Cinema.)

THE GRUDGE
Takashi Shimizu's remake of his successful Japanese horror film. With Sarah Michelle Gellar and Clea DuVall. Opening Oct. 22.

LIGHTNING IN A BOTTLE
Antoine Fuqua directed this concert documentary of the 2003 tribute to the blues at Radio City Music Hall. With Buddy Guy, Ruth Brown, Joe Perry, Macy Gray, and others. Opening Oct. 22. (Angelika Film Center and Empire 25.)

THE MACHINIST
In a thriller directed by Brad Anderson, Christian Bale plays a man who hasn't slept in a year. With Jennifer Jason Leigh. Opening Oct. 22. (Angelika Film Center.)

THE MANSON FAMILY
A docudrama about the cult and its influence, directed by Jim Van Bebber ("Deadbeat at Dawn"). Opening Oct. 22. (Cinema Village.)

POSTMEN IN THE MOUNTAINS
Jianqi Huo directed this drama about a Chinese mailman who is handing over his route to his son. In Mandarin. Opening Oct. 22. (Cinema Village.)

SEX IS COMEDY
Catherine Breillat's new film is a semiautobiographical drama about a director who is trying to shoot a sex scene between two uncoöperative actors. In French. Opening Oct. 20. (Film Forum.)

SIDEWAYS
Reviewed this week in The Current Cinema. Opening Oct. 20.

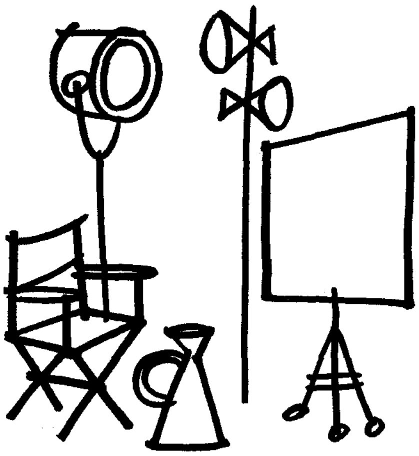
SURVIVING CHRISTMAS
A lonely millionaire (Ben Affleck) rents a family for the holidays, in a comedy directed by Mike Mitchell. With James Gandolfini, Christina Applegate, and Catherine O'Hara. Opening Oct. 22.

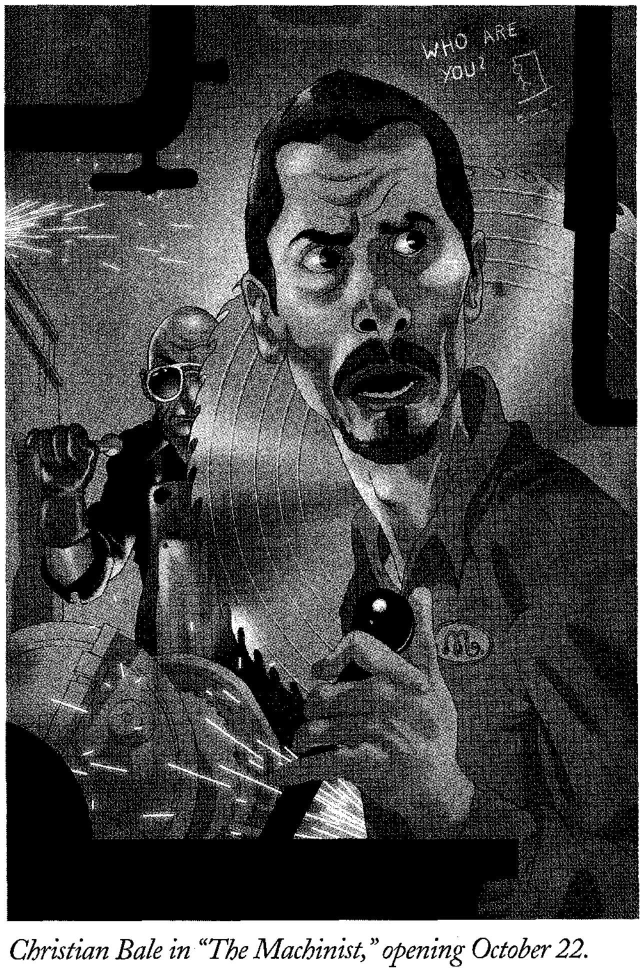
UNDERTOW
A drama co-written and directed by David Gordon Green, about a Southern family riven by feuds and secrets. The cast includes Jamie Bell, Josh Lucas, and Dermot Mulroney. Opening Oct. 22. (Union Square.)

FILM NOTES

THE CRANES ARE FLYING
This Mikhail Kalatozov film was made during the de-Stalinization period of the late fifties; set during the Second World War, it deals with a beautiful Moscow girl (the lovely Tatiana Samoilova) who is trapped in a loveless marriage with an unpatriotic and hence decadent pianist after her fiancé (Alexei Batalov) goes to the front. Somewhat silly, but with fine sequences, and Miss Samoilova, a grandniece of Stanislavsky, does him honor. In Russian.—*Pauline Kael* (Moving Image; Oct. 22.)

THE EYE
She sees dead people. That's the hook of the Pang brothers' proficient, often overrated 2002 horror movie about a young Chinese woman, blind since age two, who gets a cornea transplant that gives her sight and second sight. Although the picture falls prey to the same vices of inflation and self-importance that turn every relative of "The Sixth Sense" (including the original) into nonsense, most of the time it stays true to an older, more disreputable and more entertaining horror formula. It's like one of those hoary pulp fictions about a killer's hand or a psychotic's brain taking over a new human host, only this time the tale gets pegged to advancements in eye surgery. There's no denying the Pang brothers' deftness at sustaining their frenetic, nerve-jangling style, or their inventiveness at portraying spectres that bend the surface of reality. And there's also something resonant about the story's unfolding in a culture where spirits make their presence felt and an uncle can taunt his nephew with the line "Were you reincarnated into the wrong body?" In Cantonese, Thai, English, and Mandarin.—*Michael Sragow* (Walter Reade Theatre; Oct. 21-22.)





Christian Bale in "The Machinist," opening October 22.

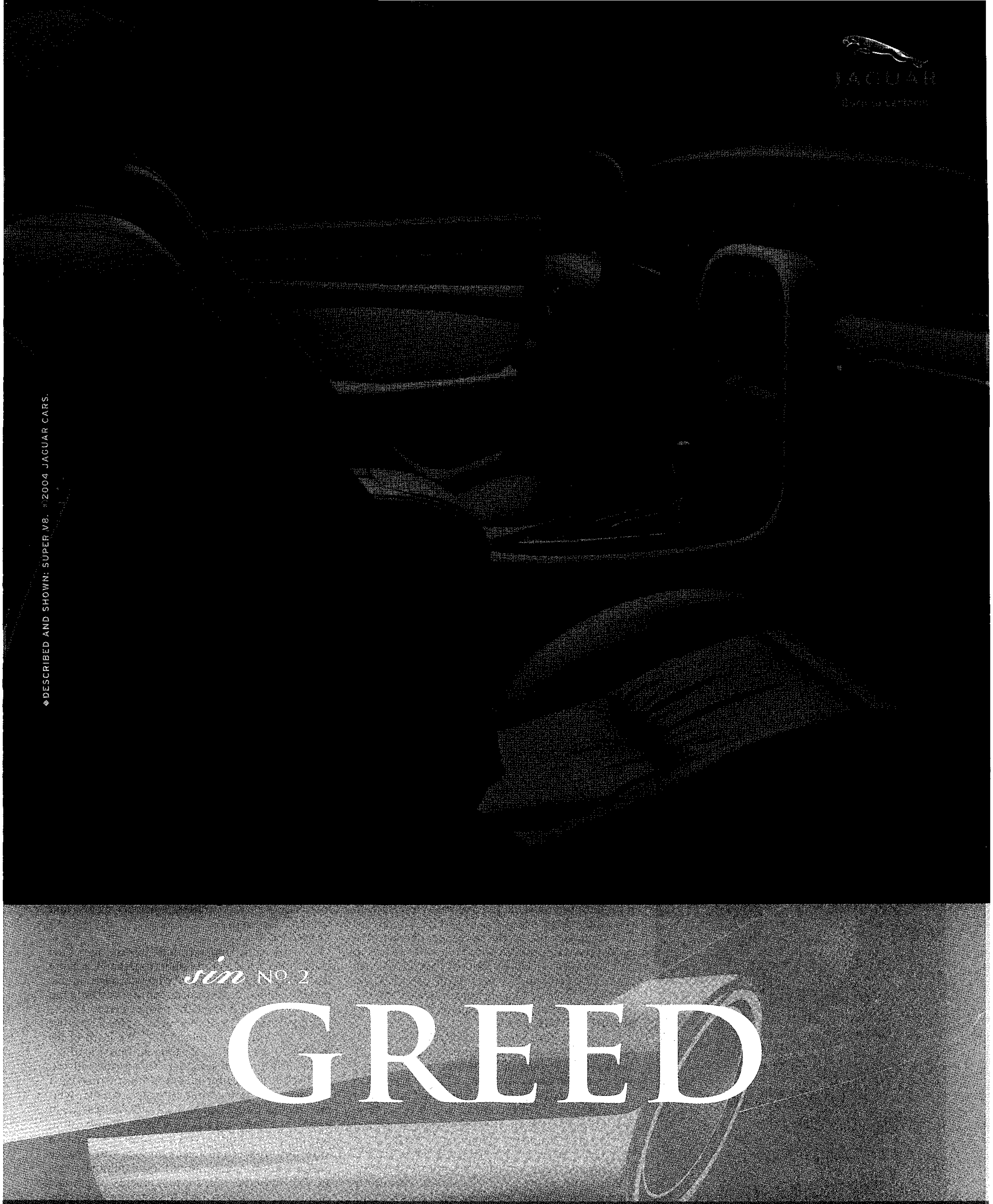
TOMER HANUKA

HERO
The Chinese director Zhang Yimou, having previously worked on a restrained scale, decides to go symphonic. Hence the broad thrusts of this movie, which is set two thousand years ago and is designed to show that, at a time when other modern civilizations were still mud-bound, China was putting the final touches on the process of governing by martial arts. The pitiless leader of the Qin kingdom welcomes a young official (Jet Li) who has allegedly killed off three notable assassins, thus insuring peace in the land. His story does not ring true, and we are duly led through a variety of competing versions, each of them shot in different colors, under different skies. The result is not so much a historical epic as a kind of highly determined ballet: dreamy with bloodless violence, relying less on shades of character than on magnificence of gesture, and closer to the Michael Powell of "The Red Shoes" or "Tales of Hoffmann," say, than to the strivings of David Lean. With the unflappable Maggie Cheung. Cinematography by Christopher Doyle. In Mandarin.—*Anthony Lane* (Reviewed in our issue of 9/6/04.) (Empire 25 and Union Square.)

I ♥ HUCKABEES
David O. Russell's new satire is an authentic disaster peppered with many odd and brilliant moments. The characters, skittering along the edges of the frame, speak only about Big Ideas, say everything four times, quarrel at the drop of a non sequitur, and have sex in uncomfortable places. The hero, one Albert Markovski (Jason Schwartzman), is the head of an open-spaces conservation group, and he makes a deal with a rising young executive (Jude Law) at Huckabees, a superstore chain, to preserve some woods. Yet Albert, a surly little hysteric, feels lost, so he hires two "existential detectives" (Dustin Hoffman and Lily Tomlin) to find out what's wrong with him. The true existentialist, however, is Caterine Vauban (Isabelle Huppert), a sexy *philosophe* in a limo who believes that life (as it says on her business card) is "cruelty, manipulation, meaninglessness." She and Albert make love on a log. There's much more, all of it devoted to a quarrel between two philosophical viewpoints—that everything is connected and that everything is separate. Russell embraces both sides—there are messy scenes in which everyone talks at once and saner moments, when the eccentricities of the individual characters stand out. With Mark Wahlberg, who is touching and funny as a fireman with nothing on his mind but petroleum. Jeff Baena worked on the garrulous screenplay with Russell.—*David Denby* (10/4/04) (Beekman, Chelsea Cinemas, Empire 25, Kips Bay Theatre, Lincoln Square, and Village Theatre VII.)

INFERNAL AFFAIRS
Some viewers have found themselves challenged by the intricate plot of this film, but anybody used to disentangling an entire bowl of noodles should have no problem. What we have is a little mole-on-mole action, revolving around a couple of Hong Kong cops (Tony Leung and Andy Lau). One works undercover, reporting from the entourage of a drug lord (Eric Tsang). The other works openly for the police department, but secretly as a snitch for the same villain. Neither policeman knows what the other looks like, and it takes a flurry of nervous pursuits and rooftop encounters before the scales fall from their eyes. The movie presents itself as a stack of character studies, but the leads are constructed from layers of impassive cool, and the roles for women—a shrink, an old flame—are comically fleeting. What makes the picture work is its unflagging devotion to the play of gleam and shadow: to a vision of Hong Kong as a natural hotbed of treason and double cross. For those who need a fix of further confusion, two sequels are ready and waiting in the wings. With Anthony Wong as the police chief, who suffers an amazing fall from grace. In Cantonese.—*A.L.* (9/20/04) (Angelika Film Center.)

THE MOTORCYCLE DIARIES
In 1952, a medical student called Ernesto Guevara de la Serna (Gael García Bernal) teamed up with his friend Al-



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EVENTS

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berto Granado (Rodrigo de la Serna), a biochemist, and journeyed eight thousand miles through South America. The tale of their travels is the basis for Walter Salles's ravishing, suggestive, and faintly superfluous film. Both young men are of middle-class Argentinean stock, and Ernesto has a girlfriend so rich and beautiful that her family's estate, as Alberto notes, looks like Switzerland. If he had stayed with her, Latin-American history might have taken a more placid turn; instead, Ernesto remounted his motorbike, headed into the Andes, and began the determined process of turning into Che Guevara. The film is sprinkled with gestures toward that future, especially when the two men work at a leper colony on the Amazon, but the foreshadowing doesn't always convince; the sequence in which they meet a pair of wandering Communists on the road and drink in the saga of their suffering is biographically accurate, yet it feels dramatically forced. In the end, the film might best be read as a high-class, episodic buddy picture, with the tubby, more skeptical Alberto (he's like a young Robert Donat) observing with interest the spark of indignation—and the air of chaste reticence—in his impossibly handsome pal.—*A.L.* (9/27/04) (BAM Rose Cinemas, Battery Park 11, East 86th Street Cinemas, Empire 25, First & 62nd Cinemas, Kips Bay Theatre, Lincoln Plaza Cinemas, 19th Street East 6, and Sunshine Cinema.)

P.S.

The second feature film from Dylan Kidd, who leapt to our attention with the scurrilous "Roger Dodger." The new picture stars Laura Linney as a mousy director of admissions at Columbia, who, one day, refines her selection process by having sex with a young applicant (Topher Grace). The reason for this unorthodox approach is that he shares a name with a former sweetheart of hers, now dead; as motives go, it doesn't sound that strong, and you wouldn't trust her with a phone directory, but still. The rest of the movie hovers and quavers around that initial act. The heroine's ex-husband (Gabriel Byrne) confesses to his own carnal excess, looking none too pleased about it; her best friend (Marcia Gay Harden), understandably intrigued, arrives in town and introduces the now bewildered student to her cleavage; and the kid himself stays cool, presumably wondering what these messed-up adults are so concerned about. He has a point. Kidd's film lacks the bite and nerve of its predecessor; it glides along in the service of a whiny wistfulness. As a guide to college-entrance procedures, of course, it's unsurpassed.—*A.L.* (10/18/04) (Angelika Film Center and Empire 25.)

SHARK TALE

Dreamworks, the Avis of computer-generated animation, may try harder, but, once again, it delivers an artistic disappointment. A fish called Oscar (Will Smith) becomes a celebrity after mistakenly winning a shark fight. Though his fellow undersea creatures have been designed to resemble the stars who voice them (Martin Scorsese, Robert De Niro, Renée Zellweger, Jack Black), this does more damage than good—the script is filled with hollow references to past films.—*Bruce Diones* (Battery Park 11, Chelsea West, First & 62nd Cinemas, 42nd Street E Walk, Kips Bay Theatre, Lincoln Square, Orpheum VII, 34th Street Theatre, Union Square, and Ziegfeld.)

SHAUN OF THE DEAD

It is only natural to be scared of zombies, and to prevent them from laying waste to your home. A more relaxing approach, however, is to be bored and vaguely annoyed by them, or, better still, not to notice them in the first place. This is the premise of Edgar Wright's British comedy, which may be responsible for kicking off a new and specialized genre of slacker horror. Shaun (Simon Pegg) lives a supremely uneventful life, which revolves around his girlfriend (Kate Ashfield), his mother (Penelope Wilton), and, above all, his local pub. This gentle routine is threatened when the dead return to life and make strenuous attempts to snack on ordinary Londoners. The finale, in which the pub turns into an Alamo, is the bloodiest, most orthodox, and least witty part of the movie; far sharper are the early scenes in which Shaun wanders happily to the local store along a battered, zombie-dotted street and pulps his attackers with a cricket bat. The central joke is so snappy and well sustained that you barely catch sight of the ominous vision on offer: a country that already feels like death.—*A.L.* (9/27/04) (Battery Park 11, Empire 25, 34th Street Theatre, and Union Square.)

SKY CAPTAIN AND THE WORLD OF TOMORROW

At first, it might seem curious that the writer-director Kerry Conran chose to use his digital wizardry to re-create the look of Fritz Lang's "Metropolis" and other Expressionist films, but the nineteen-twenties were a time when the language of film was in a fluid, experimental stage, as directors refined their use of montage, transparency, and camera effects. Now, with the increased realism of computer-generated images, directors like Conran seem propelled by a new sense of possibility about what can be accomplished onscreen. In any event, "Sky Captain" is an impressive technical achievement, seamlessly integrating A-list actors into an imaginary world—only, at times, one wishes that this world weren't so dark (literally). Would Conran's computer renderings seem fake in full daylight, or is his commitment to noir just a shade too extreme? His dedication to the celluloid past, however, is beyond question—among the plentiful homages is one to the immortal Laurence Olivier, who has a cameo from the crypt. The story is a pastiche of classic sci-fi adventures, with Jude Law as an aviator and Gwyneth Paltrow as a reporter on the trail of a doomsday cult. If the movie is powered more by its rousing, brassy score than by its emotional connections, the slack is taken up by the continuous revelation of Conran's visual inventions.—*Michael Agger* (Battery Park 11, Empire 25, Lincoln Square, 19th Street East 6, Orpheum VII, 64th and 2nd, 34th Street Theatre, and Village Theatre VII.)

STAGE BEAUTY

Billy Crudup, with a slender waist, long lashes, and a bit of a flirtatious pucker, is Ned Kynaston, the reigning Desdemona, Ophelia, and Juliet of the early Restoration period. When the theatre-loving Charles II decrees that henceforth women shall play women, Kynaston is replaced by his dresser, Maria (Claire Danes), who imitates his stylized, Kabuki-like "female" gestures and isn't very good as a woman. Can the homosexual Kynaston play a man onstage? Or in bed? This coarse-grained semi-successor to "Shakespeare in Love" is roistering and appetitive, and the camera rushes about meaninglessly (the theatre director Richard Eyre seems to be demonstrating that he can be as "cinematic" as anyone). Crudup doesn't do badly in the role, but one feels sorry for him—people are always pulling up Kynaston's gown and reaching for his member to see if he's really a man. The movie is unconvincing and graceless, and weirdly anachronistic and overexplicit about gender issues. With Tom Wilkinson as a theatre manager and the dreadful, movie-wrecking Rupert Everett as Charles II. The American writer Jeffrey Hatcher adapted his own play.—*D.D.* (10/11/04) (Chelsea Cinemas and Sunshine Cinema.)

TARNATION

"Notes from the Underground" hits the age of the iMac, and it's not a pretty sight. Jonathan Caouette is a young Texan filmmaker who was raised in dismaying, sometimes brutal, circumstances and who has now trawled through them for evidence. The result is part trip, part secret journal, spliced together into a lurid public memorandum. We learn of his mother, Renee, who, by the time she bore Jonathan, in the early nineteen-seventies, had already suffered electric-shock treatment and a violent marriage. Her son was farmed out to foster parents, who maintained the cycle of harm. There is one scene in which, as a boy of eleven, he stages a plaintive drag act, and, watching it, you can barely imagine a more disturbed child; whether such disturbance makes for coherent, let alone tactful, filmmaking is another question. There are moments of graphic beauty here (Gus Van Sant, unsurprisingly, was the executive producer), but also smears of unpleasantness; if the middle-aged, once radiant Renee is now a picture of emotional damage, is it right for a loving son to trap her ravings on camera and put them on show?—*A.L.* (10/18/04) (Film Forum.)

TEAM AMERICA: WORLD POLICE

Trey Parker and Matt Stone, the unruly spirits behind the "South Park" series, return with their second feature film, a satirical extravaganza with an all-puppet cast. The puppets have large, lambent eyes, and, compared to some Hollywood stars, their faces are actually very expressive. Parker and Stone have a lot of devious fun with their helpless toys: they blow them up, feed them to fish, and capture them in gymnastic moments of intimacy (this last stunt almost earned the film an NC-17 rating). The story has a team of U.S. Special Forces flying out of their base inside Mt. Rushmore to find weapons of mass destruction, a scenario that provides plenty of opportunity to mock G.I. Joe heroism, where America is always coming to save the day! Parker and Stone's recklessness has (and evokes) a certain giddiness, but this is satire delivered via body blows. The best moments are the subtler scenes about the craft of acting (which turns out to be a crucial weapon against terrorists), and the songs, with their improbable lyrics. The movie's surreal high point may be a puppet pining for his true love while crooning about Michael Bay.—*M.A.* (Battery Park 11, 42nd Street E Walk, Kips Bay Theatre, Lincoln Square, New York Twin, 19th Street East 6, Orpheum VII, 34th Street Theatre, and Village Theatre VII.)

VERA DRAKE

In its limited way, perfect. The title character in Mike Leigh's new movie is a middle-aged cleaning lady (Imelda Staunton) who races through her London working-class neighborhood singing to herself. The time is 1950, and though the dark and depressed city still suffers from wartime austerities Vera brings the light. The short, pudding-faced woman drops in on invalids, offers a few words of sympathy, and then makes her way to the luxurious flats of the wealthy, whose objets d'art and fireplace grills she dusts and polishes, sometimes on her knees. Vera gives of herself freely and easily, and it is precisely in that selfless and attentive way—brisk, efficient, consoling—that, using a tube and a noxious solution, she terminates one unwanted pregnancy after another. Working with an almost preternatural calm, Leigh sets up the repressive and sexually inarticulate atmosphere of the time; Vera's furtive activity is part of an entire system of shadowy reticence and embarrassed dithering. And Leigh captures, without sentimentality or condescension, the grave and stoical spirit of the English working class. The movie is hushed and intense; it evokes an entire way of life. With Phil Davis as Vera's husband, Stan. Photographed, with immaculate fidelity to a dun-colored London, by Dick Pope.—*D.D.* (10/11/04) (Angelika Film Center and Lincoln Square.)

WINTER KILLS

Based on a novel by Richard Condon, the author of "The Manchurian Candidate," this 1979 film tries to do for the American father what the earlier Condon work did for the American mother while assembling a jagged conspiracy jigsaw puzzle that's wilder than anything Oliver Stone might concoct. Jeff Bridges plays the half-brother of the assassinated President Kegan; John Huston struts away with the movie as the rip-snorting head of the Kegan clan. If the writer-director, William Richert, sees America as putty in the hands of mobsters, industrialists, and information brokers, at least it's Silly Putty. Richert takes so many potshots at favorite New Left targets (including the New Frontier) that he might be satirizing paranoia itself, and, with Huston, Richard Boone, and Sterling Hayden in key roles, the film becomes a parody of movie machismo, especially when Huston roams around his mansion in a white Oriental robe and skimpy red drawers.—*M.S.* (Thalia Theatre; Oct. 21.)

YOUNG FRANKENSTEIN

A farce-parody of Hollywood's mad-scientist movies. You have to let this 1974 Mel Brooks comedy do everything for you, because that's the only way it works. If you accept the silly, zizzy obviousness, it can make you laugh helplessly. Gene Wilder is the old Baron's scientist-grandson, Peter Boyle is the new Monster, and Madeline Kahn is the scientist's fiancée, who becomes the Monster's bride. The picture is in black-and-white, which holds it visually close to the films it takes off from. It's Brooks' most sustained piece of moviemak-

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ing—the laughs never let up. The script is by Wilder and Brooks. With Cloris Leachman, Marty Feldman, Teri Garr, Liam Dunn, Richard Haydn, Kenneth Mars, and Gene Hackman, bearded, in a masterly bit as a blind man.—*P.K.* (Sunshine Cinema; Oct. 22-23.)

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Unless noted, call 212-777-FILM for show times.

Angelika Film Center, 18 W. Houston St.
BAM Rose Cinemas, 30 Lafayette Ave., Brooklyn.
Battery Park 11, West St. at Vesey St.
Beekman, Second Ave. at 66th St.
Chelsea Cinemas, 260 W. 23rd St.
Chelsea West, 333 W. 23rd St.
Cinemas 1, 2, and 3, Third Ave. at 60th St.
Cinema Village, 22 E. 12th St. (212-924-3363).
East 86th Street Cinemas, Third Ave. at 86th St.
84th Street Sixplex, Broadway at 84th St.
Empire 25, on 42nd St. near Eighth Ave. (212-398-3939).
59th Street East Cinema, 239 E. 59th St.
Film Forum, W. Houston St. west of Sixth Ave. (212-727-8110).
First & 62nd Cinemas, 400 E. 62nd St.
42nd Street E Walk, 42nd St. near Eighth Ave.
Kips Bay Theatre, Second Ave. at 32nd St.
Lincoln Plaza Cinemas, Broadway at 63rd St. (212-757-2280).
Lincoln Square, Broadway at 68th St.
New York Twin, Second Ave. at 66th St.
19th Street East 6, Broadway at 19th St.
Orpheum VII, Third Ave. at 86th St.
Paris, 4 W. 58th St. (212-688-3800).
Pioneer Theatre, 155 E. 3rd St. (212-254-3300).
Quad Cinema, 34 W. 13th St.
72nd Street East, Third Ave. at 71st St.
64th and 2nd, Second Ave. at 64th St.
62nd & Broadway, 62 W. 62nd St.
Sunshine Cinema, 143 E. Houston St. (212-330-8182).
Sutton 1 and 2, Third Ave. at 57th St.
34th Street Theatre, 312 W. 34th St.
Union Square, Broadway at 13th St.
Village East Cinemas, Second Ave. at 12th St.
Village Theatre VII, Third Ave. at 11th St.
Ziegfeld, 141 W. 54th St.

REVIVALS, CLASSICS, ETC.

Titles with a dagger are reviewed above.

AMERICAN MUSEUM OF THE MOVING IMAGE
35th Ave. at 36th St., Astoria (718-784-0077)—"Russian Nights." Oct. 22 at 7:30: "The Cranes Are Flying" (†). ♦ Through Oct. 31: A Ken Russell retrospective. Oct. 23 at 2: "The Boy Friend" (1971). ♦ Oct. 23 at 4:30: "Savage Messiah" (1972). ♦ Oct. 23-24 at 6:30: "Tommy" (1975). ♦ Oct. 24 at 2: "Mahler" (1974). ♦ Oct. 24 at 4:15: "Lisztomania" (1975).
ANTHOLOGY FILM ARCHIVES
32 Second Ave., at 2nd St. (212-505-5110)—Through Oct. 21: A retrospective of films by Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet. Oct. 20 at 7: "Every Revolution Is a Throw of the Dice" (1977) and "Too Early, Too Late" (1980-81). ♦ Oct. 20 at 9: "Othon" (1969) and "En Racachant" (1982). ♦ Oct. 21 at 7: "Class Relations" (1983). ♦ Oct. 21 at 9: "Death of Empedocles" (1987). ♦ "*The Onion* Presents." Oct. 21 at 8: "Cemetery Man" (1994, Michele Soavi). ♦ Oct. 21-24: The CineKink N.Y.C. Film Festival.
BAM ROSE CINEMAS
30 Lafayette Ave., Brooklyn (718-777-3456)—"Cinema Tropical." Oct. 20 at 7:30: "To the Left of the Father" (2002, Luiz Fernando Carvalho; in Spanish). ♦ New films from France. Oct. 21 at 4:30 and 9:15 and Oct. 24 at 2 and 6:50: "A Real Man" (2003, Arnaud and Jean-Marie Larrieu). ♦ Oct. 21 at 6:50: "The 10th District Court: Moments of Trial" (2004, Raymond Depardon). ♦ Oct. 22 at 2 and 6:50: "25 Degrees in Winter" (2004, Stéphane Vuillet). ♦ Oct. 22 at 4:30 and 9:15 and Oct. 23 at 2 and 6:50: "The Mystery of the Yellow Room" (2003, Bruno Podalydès). ♦ Oct. 23 at 4:30 and 9:15: "Work Hard, Play Hard" (2003, Jean-Marc Moutout). ♦ Films by Nuri Bilge Ceylan. Oct. 25-26 at 4:30, 6:50, and 9:15: "Distant" (2002; in Turkish). ♦ Oct. 22-23: Hollis Frampton films.
FILM FORUM
W. Houston St. west of Sixth Ave. (212-727-8110)— Oct. 19-21 at 1, 2:50, 4:40, 6:30, 8:20, and 10:10: "Dr. Strangelove; or, How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb" (1964, Stanley Kubrick). ♦ Oct. 22-26 at 1, 3:10, 5:20, 7:30, and 9:40: "Hearts and Minds" (1974, Peter Davis).
FLORENCE GOULD HALL
55 E. 59th St. (212-355-6160)—Through Nov. 16: "Sisters: Dorléac and Deneuve." Oct. 26 at 12:30, 3:30, 6:30, and 9: "Billion Dollar Brain" (1967, Ken Russell).
SUNSHINE CINEMA
143 E. Houston St. (212-330-8182)—Midnight movies. Oct. 22-23: "Young Frankenstein" (†).
THALIA THEATRE
Symphony Space, Broadway at 95th St. (212-864-5400)—Through Oct. 31: A tribute to the documentarian Emile de Antonio. Oct. 20 at 7: "Point of Order" (1964). ♦ Oct. 20 at 8:45: "Gabriel Over the White House" (1933, Gregory La Cava). ♦ Oct. 21 at 7: "In the Year of the Pig" (1968). ♦ Oct. 21 at 9: "Winter Kills" (†).
WALTER READE THEATRE
Lincoln Center (212-875-5600)—Through Oct. 28: Recent films from Hong Kong. All films are in Cantonese. Oct. 20 at 2 and 6:15 and Oct. 21 at 3: "A Chinese Odyssey" (2002, Jeff Lau). ♦ Oct. 20 at 4 and 8:15 and Oct. 21 at 9:15: "Time and Tide" (2000, Tsui Hark). ♦ Oct. 21 at 1 and Oct. 22 at 9:15: "The Eye" (†). ♦ Oct. 22 at 2, Oct. 24 at 4, and Oct. 25 at 1: "Darkness Bride" (2003, William Kwok). ♦ Oct. 22 at 4, Oct. 23 at 1:30, and Oct. 25 at 3: "Golden Chicken" (2002, Samson Chiu). ♦ Oct. 23 at 3:40 and 7:40: "In the Mood for Love" (2000, Wong Kar-wai). ♦ Oct. 23 at 5:45 and 9:45: "Breaking News" (2004, Johnnie To). ♦ Oct. 24 at 2 and Oct. 26 at 1 and 7:10: "Lan Yu" (2001, Stanley Kwan). ♦ Oct. 24 at 9: "Throw Down" (2004, To). ♦ Oct. 26 at 3 and 9: "PTU" (2003, To). ♦ Oct. 26 at 5: "July Rhapsody" (2002, Ann Hui).

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United States,

or simply the

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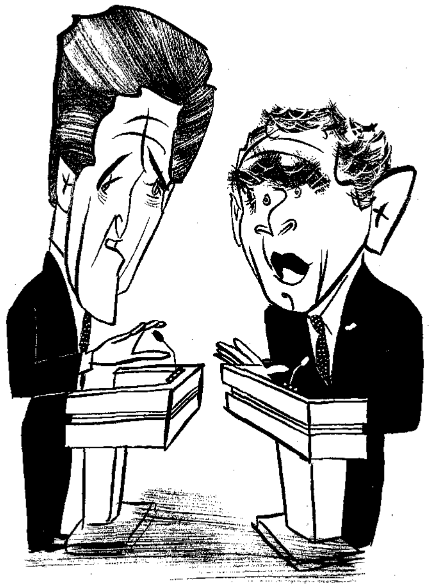
THE NEW YORKER

THE TALK OF THE TOWN

COMMENT
QUESTIONS OF GREATNESS

In 1997, William Kristol and David Brooks, writing in the *Wall Street Journal,* offered a critique of the Republican Party of Newt Gingrich and Bob Dole. "What's missing from today's American conservatism is America," they wrote. "The left has always blamed America first. Conservatives once deplored this. They defended America. And when they sought to improve America, they did so by recalling Americans to their highest principles, and by calling them forward to a grand destiny. What is missing from today's conservatism is the appeal to American greatness." The forefathers the authors claimed for what they termed "national-greatness conservatism" were Abraham Lincoln and Theodore Roosevelt, and in the 2000 primary campaign its champion was Senator John McCain. It was never entirely clear what kind of grand destiny Kristol, Brooks, and McCain had in mind; the anti-government ideology of the modern Republican Party doesn't leave much room for crusades as ambitious as ending slavery and trust-busting. Still, the rhetoric suggested a turn away from the Party's reflexive hostility to government. Then McCain lost to George W. Bush in the primaries, and national-greatness conservatism looked like an idea that would never make it off the op-ed page.

But, a year later, because of historical circumstance and personal character, President Bush embraced half the idea, in the realm of international affairs. His foreign policy inspires comparisons, from admirers and detractors alike, with such Presidential heavy hitters as Woodrow Wilson and Ronald Reagan. When he talks about America's role in the world, his eyes light up and his manner grows calmer and his language turns clear and lofty. Until the war in Iraq began to deteriorate, he consistently had his opponents on the defensive—all the more because they so often failed to recognize the attractive power of his vision. During the campaign's final debate, last Wednesday night, on domestic and economic policy, the President's most resonant moments came when he was able to talk about things other than domestic and economic policy: his religion, his women, and his notion of a world transformed by American power. "As we pursue the enemy wherever it exists, we'll also spread freedom and liberty. We've got great faith in the ability of liberty to transform societies," he declared in his closing statement—an idea that was once expressed, with a bit more eloquence, by Lincoln.



Here at home, Bush has governed more along the lines of Rutherford B. Hayes and Benjamin Harrison, bewhiskered and now forgotten Republicans of the Gilded Age. Like them, he has devoted his energy to keeping his party's most powerful constituents happy, providing them with regular feedings, opening the White House to business lobbies, and turning his congressional majority into a patronage machine at the expense of fiscal sanity and simple fairness. His legislative agenda projects nothing like the ambitious idealism of his foreign policy; at home, the global crusader remains a crony capitalist. In last week's debate, Bush's solution for the most pressing domestic problems of his Presidency was a kind of verbal shrug. What to do about the steep drop in the value of the minimum wage? "Listen, the No Child Left Behind Act is really a jobs act," the President insisted, in a non sequitur. Who's to blame for skyrocketing health-insurance costs? "Gosh, I sure hope it's not the Administration," he said with a chuckle. According to Bush's philosophy of government, Amer-

ILLUSTRATIONS BY TOM BACHTELL

ica's ability to assert its will for the greater good around the world is enormous. In Toledo—well, there are limits.

The contradiction in being T.R. abroad and Rutherford B. Hayes at home has plagued Bush's governance ever since the terror attacks. He has lacked the vocabulary and perhaps the desire to summon a national community and to ask it for sacrifice and commitment in the fight against the foreign enemy. His energy policy, his fixation on tax cuts, and his sweetheart contracts with friendly corporations have directly undermined the war effort. The deeper effect of a narrow, partisan domestic agenda has been to polarize the country when unity was required.

If Senator Kerry wins (and at the end of last week's debate he sounded like a man who thought he could afford to be gracious), his room for maneuver will be extremely limited. The constraints won't come only from the war, the deficits, and a probable Republican majority in at least one house of Congress. The conservative tide of the past quarter century has made it almost impossible for government to address our most serious national problems. The erosion of middle-class jobs and incomes and the startling rise in the number of poor and uninsured Americans are calamities without congressional hearings, bipartisan commissions, and patriotic oratory. Along the bandwidth of acceptable domestic policy there is no longer room for the state to play a decisive role in reversing these disastrous trends.

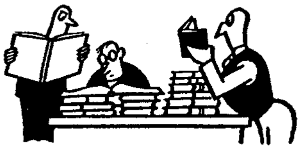
There used to be a word for national greatness on the home front: liberalism. It was a philosophy that made the federal government the guarantor of individual rights and of equal opportunity. Several decades of political combat have turned it into a term of abuse. In recent days, with the race closing to a dead heat, Bush reached deep into his father's old campaign arsenal for the Republicans' ultimate equalizer and began to deploy the L-word against Kerry. In the last two debates, the President used it and its synonym, "Massachusetts," so often that they began to sound like locker-room taunts. But one had only to look over at the gravely composed face of the Democratic challenger, and hear his sonorous voice explain the business tax credit in his health-care plan, to realize just how temperamentally conservative Kerry is. "I believe I offer tested, strong leadership that can calm the waters of a troubled world," he concluded, sounding more like Dwight Eisenhower than like George McGovern.

As an insult, liberalism has probably outlived its usefulness. As a vision of justice and equality—two words that Kerry ventured to speak last Wednesday night—it never stopped being relevant. In the past few years, America has grown manifestly less equal and less free even while offering itself as a model to undemocratic countries. The next President could help our case before the world by acknowledging these facts and using the power of the office to begin correcting them. He wouldn't have to call himself a liberal; he could simply act like one.

—*George Packer*

INK

PRIZE FIGHT



The host of a dinner party on Fifth Avenue, not long ago, greeted guests with a question: "Can you tell me how clichés subjugate people?" The occasion for this puzzler was that afternoon's announcement of the 2004 Nobel Prize in Literature, which was awarded to a little-known Austrian writer named Elfriede Jelinek. Jelinek, according to the Nobel citation, had won "for her musical flow of voices and counter-voices in novels and plays that with extraordinary linguistic zeal reveal the absurdity of society's clichés and their subjugating power." Pardon?

Rumors began circulating that even Morgan Entrekin, the head of Grove/Atlantic, which has published Jelinek, didn't know who she was when people stopped to congratulate him at the Frankfurt Book Fair. Not true: "I'd heard of Jelinek," Entrekin said last week. "But I had not *read* Jelinek." Anyway, Entrekin had already moved on to a newer topic of literary-prize chatter—the National Book Awards, whose finalists were announced last Wednesday. "I haven't read *one* of those books," Entrekin said, of the five fiction candidates. "I'm sure they were all worthy in their own way. But I had only *heard* of one of them."

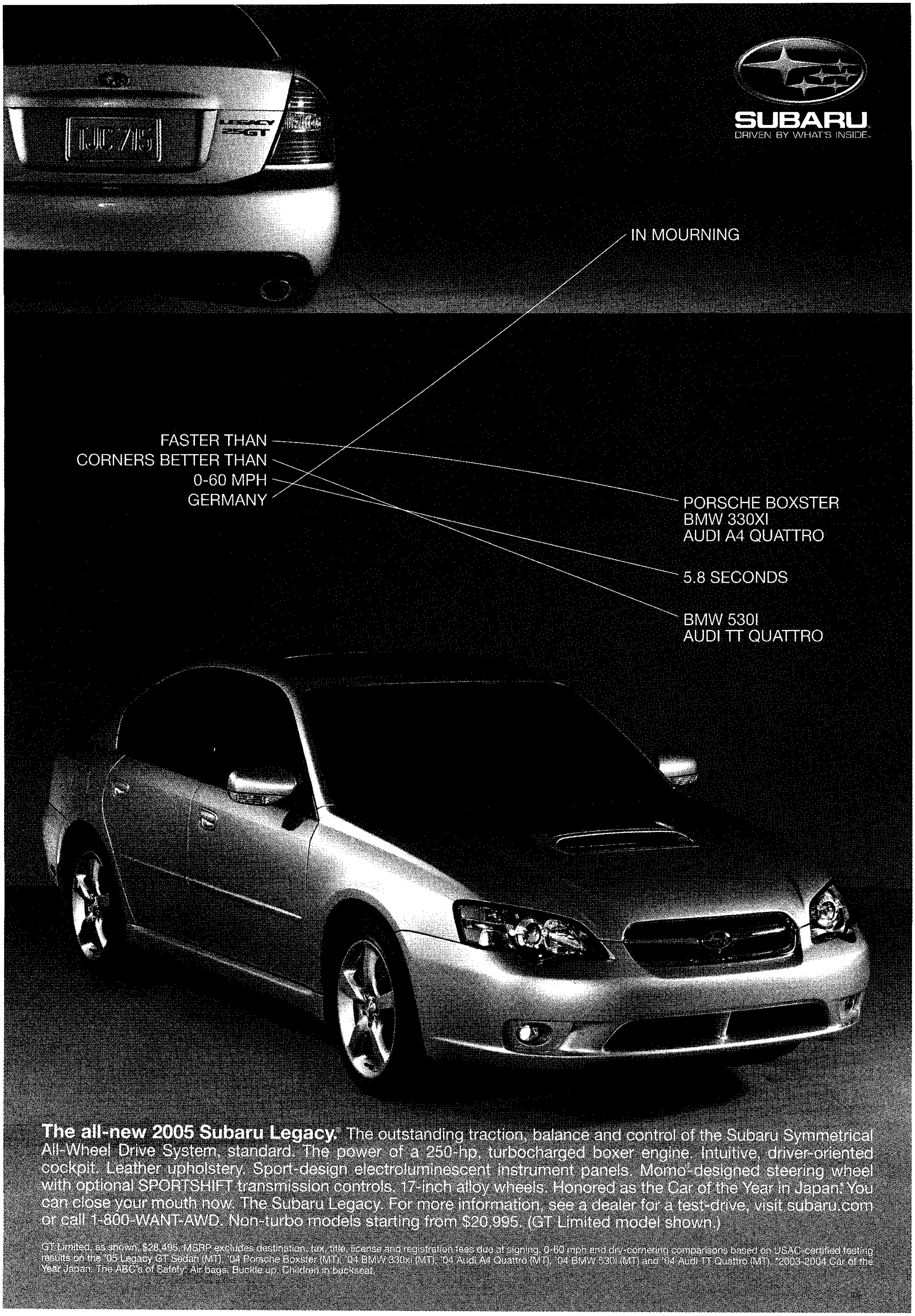
Consider some of the writers who were eligible this year: Philip Roth, Tom Wolfe, Joyce Carol Oates, John Updike, Cynthia Ozick. And the nominees are: Sarah Shun-lien Bynum, Christine Schutt, Joan Silber, Lily Tuck, and Kate Walbert. All of the authors are women, and each lives here in New York City. According to the *Times*, only one book has sold even two thousand copies.

"I'm sort of astounded at this list," the novelist Thomas McGuane said last week. "It's got a provincial tone—five women from New York? Maybe it should be called the Municipal Book Awards."

McGuane, who was a finalist for the award in 1973, for his novel "Ninety-two in the Shade," is no stranger to the selection process. He chaired the fiction committee in 1995—the last time, incidentally, that Roth won, for "Sabbath's Theater." "The judges range from cynical to earnest," McGuane explained, noting that, with hundreds of books to choose from, the task is, on its face, impossible. "You have some judges who just read forty-three words and give up." (Michael Kinsley, one of 2002's nonfiction judges, caused a minor furor when he admitted that "you must put aside any fuddy-duddy notion of not judging a book by its cover, or at least by its title.") "Generally, the winner is three people's second-favorite book," McGuane said.

Stewart O'Nan, one of this year's fiction judges (and a decidedly earnest one), doesn't see what the fuss is about. "This is just five really good books," he said. "There were a lot of books this year written by writers with large reputations, but it's not a popularity contest. I think we're all happy." He went on, "If I were handicapping I'd give all five an even, twenty-per-cent shot."

Historically, all the judges do not end up happy. Antonya Nelson, who chaired last year's fiction committee, said that she'd received an e-mail from Rick Moody, this year's chairman, asking for advice. "My only advice was that they ought to commit to being agreeable with one another," she said. She recalled a cocktail-party conversation with another former judge. "The committee he'd been overseeing had been acrimonious," she said. "He sincerely felt that the book they'd chosen was a real compromise." So she told her panel, "I don't want to be at a cocktail party in the future bad-mouthing any of you." (They chose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Shirley Hazzard's "The Great Fire.")

McGuane's committee was notably contentious and didn't decide to give Roth the prize until an hour before dinner was served at the awards banquet. "I loved 'Sabbath's Theater,'" he said. "But not everybody agreed with me. In fact, I'm confident that at least somebody on my committee was disgusted by the experience and sorry to be associated with the prize."

Whatever the case, the judges seem to be working from a murky set of guidelines. "We were charged with finding something that's enduring," Nelson recalled. "So we inclined ourselves toward the bigger palette, the historical sweep."

O'Nan said that he has read "The Plot Against America," Roth's new book, which, arguably, has been the year's most celebrated literary release. "I think it's a wonderful reworking of history that he tries to then fulfill. And it works for a while, but then he realizes he's painted himself into a corner he can't get out of, and he throws his hands up and says, 'Oh, help!' " He added, "It's a good try."

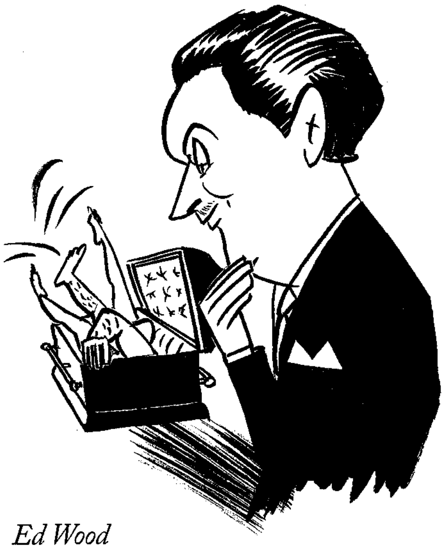
Roth ranks higher on O'Nan's list than Tom Wolfe, however, whose novel, "I Am Charlotte Simmons," is due out next month. "Ay-yi-yi, John Irving was right: the guy's not a novelist," O'Nan said. "It's nice that he thinks he's the new Dickens, but he's just not. Wow! What are you gonna do?"

McGuane, for his part, thinks there's not much you can do, given that the awards are inherently anti-democratic. "When I see an institution like this one apparently tanking, I'm not all that sorry, because there's just no way to make it viable," he said. "My first thought was, Well, this was the meltdown we were promised."

—*Ben McGrath*

IN THE VAULT
WEIRD LOVE

The filmmaker Ed Wood, Jr., who died in 1978, didn't make many movies during the last decade of his life, owing to problems with money and booze, not to mention the problem of never having made movies that were any good in the previous decades. He got by, toward the end, by writing pulp—some hundred and thirty-five sex novels, such as "Bye Bye Broadie" and "Killer in Drag." Seven years before he died, though, he did shoot one last picture, a pornographic film called "Necromania: A Tale of Weird Love!" Wood wrote, produced, and directed it (in three days, dressed in a pink baby-doll outfit) under the name Don Miller. The budget was five thousand dollars. It was one of the first skin flicks to have what, technically, could be called a plot, and for Ed Wood fanatics—among whom are many Woodites, as adherents of the Church of the Heavenly Wood call themselves (no joke)—it was for years the ultimate buried treasure, the Woodite equivalent of the Dead Sea Scrolls. Wood made two versions, one soft-core (the sex is simulated) and the other hard-core (the sex is real), both of which went missing after an extremely brief run at the Hudson Theatre, on West Forty-fourth Street, in 1971. The soft-core version turned up at a yard sale in California in 1992 and eventually achieved limited distribution, thanks to the exertions of some West Coast cult-video collectors. But the longer, dirtier cut was the grail.



Ed Wood

In 2001, after a seventeen-year quest, Rudolph Grey, the author of the Ed Wood biography "Nightmare of Ecstasy" (which became the basis for the Tim Burton film "Ed Wood"), found the triple-X "Necromania" in a warehouse in Los Angeles. He and a B-movie distributor named Alexander Kogan bought the negatives for "two and a half nickels," as Kogan put it. Their next task was to figure out what to do with them. A year ago, Kogan came across a profile in the *Times* of the blog impresario Nick Denton, who had just launched a pornography Web site called Fleshbot. Kogan e-mailed Denton and said that if Denton ever wanted to sell porn films on his site he should consider buying "Necromania." "I bought it as a joke," Kogan said last week, in an effort to make it clear that he was not, repeat not, a pornographer.

Denton, however, was interested in it as a business proposition, in his quest to become a pornographer, if a somewhat ironic one, and next week he is releasing it as Fleshbot Films' first title. And so, at long last, Woodites, if not the world, have an opportunity to see the story of Danny and Shirley, a young couple who, to spruce up their flagging sex life, visit a strange house that seems to be both a sex clinic and a funeral parlor. They seek out a therapist named Madame Heles, who ministers to her patients inside a coffin. There are numerous erotic pairings (including one between a woman and a bronze skull), some delightfully incongruous music (surf songs and cha-cha-cha), and, of course, choice dialogue (Danny, gesturing to a pair of red pajama bottoms: "For such a fancy setting, you think these are conventional enough?" Tanya: "The word 'conventional' has many connotations, never more so than in this establishment"). Compared with the pneumatic tattoo-and-tan-line porn that the Valley turns out these days, or even with the steamier passages in the sexual-harassment suit filed against Bill O'Reilly last week (one wishes that Wood had lived long enough to make a movie called "Loofah!"), the squalor of the contortions onscreen seems almost quaint.

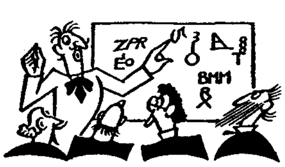
Rudy Grey, who is in his forties and lives in Hell's Kitchen, stopped by the other day to deliver a copy of an article that he wrote two years ago for the magazine *Cult Movies*, under the headline "Lost Ed Wood Movies . . . Found!" (The other lost one was an unfinished porno flick called "The Only House in Town," which Fleshbot is releasing as well.) Grey has spiky dark hair and patchy stubble; imagine Pedro Almodóvar without a job. "Ed Wood was a great filmmaker," Grey said. "Maybe he's not Hitchcock or Kubrick, but . . ." Grey is not an ironic enthusiast.

In his view, even "Necromania" contains moments of brilliance. Grey writes in *Cult Movies*, "Take particular note also of the sequence which begins 28 minutes & 7 seconds into the movie, where Ric Lutze struggles to get his red pajama bottoms unraveled to put them on. But, he can't. His fumbling lasts about 15 seconds, easily edited out. But Wood deliberately leaves it in. Why? I think it's his perverse sense of humor . . . I think he got a kick out of Lutze fumbling on camera with the pants." At the end of the piece, Grey remarks upon a moment when Danny looks behind a curtain and glimpses what some might call a blurry, kaleidoscopic orgy but which Grey calls "the sex dimension of lost souls who can never be satisfied." His last sentence: "Taking into account the context and the tone of the rest of the movie, it may be the most remarkable sequence in the history of film."

—*Nick Paumgarten*

DEPT. OF QUANTIFICATION

MURPHY AT THE BAT



It is one thing to be locked out of one's apartment, and to be forced to perform that cumbersome Manhattan ritual of window entry via fire escape. It is quite another to discover that there isn't any fire escape, and consequently, while impersonating Spider-Man, to slip and fall from five stories up, as one man on Cornelia Street did recently. His fall was broken, fortunately, by the awning of a restaurant below, and then, rather unfortunately, by the table at which two women were eating. Shards of glass lodged in the customers' hair, and although there appeared to be no serious injuries, all nearby diners were dismissed free of charge, thus depriving the restaurant of part of its haul on one of the last fine evenings of the al-fresco season.

That unlikely event, reported in the *Villager*, occurred just a few days before a minor plumbing catastrophe over at the *Times* shut down most of its toilets. Nonetheless, the paper still managed to print an account, the next day, of a tractor-trailer collision on the Jersey Turnpike (Exit 3), which loosed hundreds of live chickens. The chickens' roadside wanderings, in turn, caused traffic to be diverted for three and a half hours. (Recently, the flow on the Turnpike has also been affected by spilled crabs, pasta, cake mix, and frozen turkeys.)

The pessimists and Red Sox fans among us will tend to shrug, and perhaps, when pressed, to mutter something about Murphy's Law: Anything that can go wrong will. (Actually, the common formulation is a slight distortion of Ed Murphy's initial axiom, which stipulated, of an assistant, "If there is a wrong way to do it, he will," but whatever.) And it may be that they're right. A new study commissioned by British Gas goes so far as to demonstrate that Murphy's Law (or Sod's Law, as it's known in the U.K.) is not only a legitimate phenomenon but a measurable one.

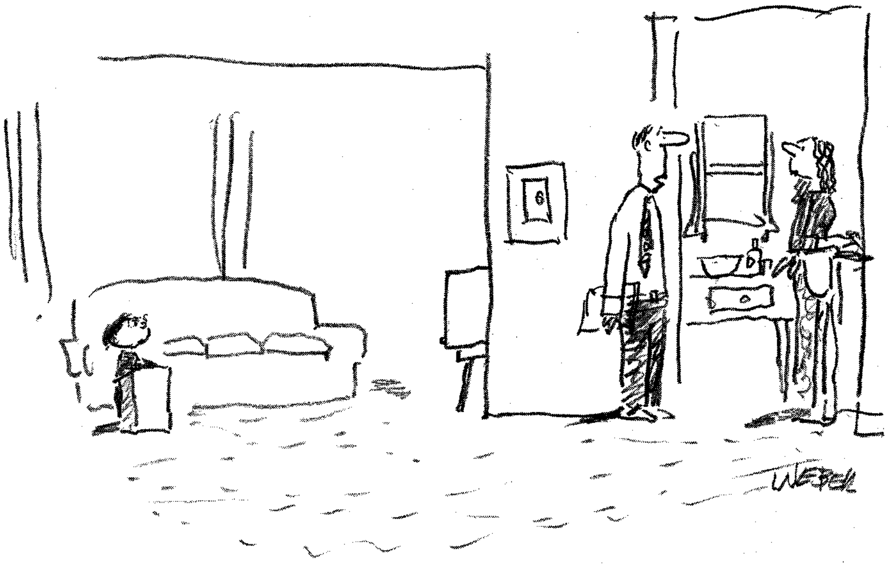
As in: Let U, C, I, S, and F be integers between 1 and 9, reflecting, respectively, comparative levels of Urgency, Complexity, Importance, Skill, and Frequency in a given set of circumstances. Let A, which stands for Aggravation, equal 0.7. (Don't ask.) The likelihood, then, of Murphy's Law obtaining under those circumstances, on a scale of 0 to 8.6, would be: $[((U + C + I) \times (10 - S)) / 20] \times A \times 1 / (1 - \sin (F / 10))$. Easy.

The study, based on a survey of 1,023 mishaps, concludes, moreover, that the old corollary to Murphy's Law—that bad things happen at the most inopportune times—is statistically significant. As a British Gas advertisement inspired by the findings puts it, "Not only will your toast fall butter side down; your toaster will break—the day after your guarantee runs out." So, for example, the chance that the shower will turn cold just when you've finished lathering up—that rates a 6.0. The chance you'll get stuck in bad traffic—chickens in the road, maybe?—when you're already running behind: 7.3.

A word of warning: the "mathematician" whom British Gas credits with helping devise the formula, Phillip Obayda, is really an architecture student in London. "I took maths and further maths," Obayda said the other day. "I had as much maths as I possibly could." He took care to point out that the use of the sine function had been adequately considered. "One factor I thought was very interesting was the factor of frequency, or familiarity," he said. "With familiarity, there are one of two possibilities: it can make you more prepared, and, on the other hand, it can increase complacency, so that you overlook obvious things. And how can that double notion of familiarity be equated? Well, I was looking at the sine graph, looking at it as an oscillating function, and it seemed to answer the question."

O.K., so how about the Red Sox? They were in town last week, postseason favorites against the Yankees for possibly the first time ever. And then, of course, they lost the first two games. "Sod's Law is in many ways unexplained failure," Obayda said. "When you take a single scenario, like, say, the Red Sox playing, you have the urgency factor and the importance factor"—these are obviously very high, given the team's infamous Championship drought—"versus the skill factor: How skillful am I, and how important do I deem this to be?"

So let's give the Sox an 8 for skill, and



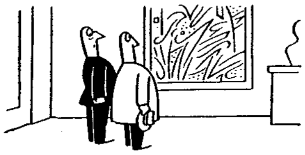
"We shouldn't have let him watch the debates."

9 for both urgency and importance. Complexity, well, it's hard to hit Rivera, but the task at hand is clear. Call it a 5. The Yankees and the Red Sox have played each other almost fifty times over the past two seasons, so frequency, too, ought to weigh heavily: 9. (In the oscillation of the sine curve, this plants the Sox more firmly in the complacency than in the preparedness department.) So now we've got: $[((9 + 5 + 9) \times (10 - 8)) / 20] \times 0.7 \times 1 / (1 - \sin (9 / 10))$. The final Murphy's Law score, in other words, is 7.4.

No wonder Johnny Damon, the Red Sox' ordinarily dependable lead-off batter, lost his swing just as Curt Schilling, the team's most durable pitcher, went down with a bum ankle.

—*Ben McGrath*

THE BENCH
FAMILY PORTRAIT



In the past several years, Maria Altmann, an amiable eighty-eight-year-old resident of Los Angeles with a lilting Austrian accent, has become something of an art-world personage. The other day, serving a picnic of Lipton tea and homemade Liptauer cheese in her living room, she spoke of friendships with the philanthropist Ronald Lauder ("Charming!"), who co-founded the Neue Galerie, in New York, and with the chairman of Christie's in America ("He just called!"). She smiled and said, "Of course, when they think I get the painting, they all . . ." Altmann lives in a small redwood bungalow with an orange tree in front, a fantastic collection of miniature seventeenth-century French watches, and a poster of "Adele Bloch-Bauer I," a 1907 portrait of her aunt by Gustav Klimt. The painting, known as the Gold Portrait, is rendered in oil, with silver and gold leaf. It has hung in the Austrian National Gallery, in Vienna, ever since the Nazis seized it from the collection of Altmann's uncle Ferdinand Bloch-Bauer, a socially prominent Jewish banker and beet-sugar magnate, after he fled Austria, in 1938.

Altmann herself fled the Nazis that year, a few months after she was married. (Hers was the last big Jewish wedding to take place in Vienna before the occupation, and Ferdinand gave her a diamond necklace that had belonged to Adele as a wedding gift. It was taken by the Gestapo and, Altmann believes, eventually given to Hermann Göring's wife.) Altmann is now suing the Republic of Austria for the return of the Gold Portrait and five other Klimt paintings—worth perhaps as much as two hundred million dollars—and, in June, won a 6–3 Supreme Court decision allowing the case to be tried in an American court. (Her lawyer, E. Randol Schoenberg, is the grandson of two Austrian composers: Arnold Schoenberg and Eric Zeisl.) This week, a judge in the U.S. District Court in Los Angeles will meet with both parties to determine scheduling for the trial. "I want to see this settled before I go to another world," Altmann said. "I want them to admit that they were wrong and that the paintings are ours."

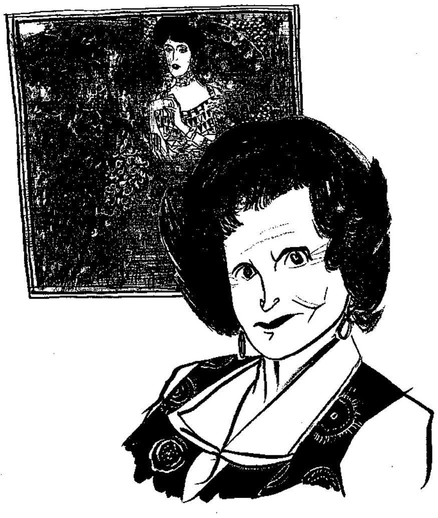
The case involves a thicket of legal issues, centering on the interpretation of Adele Bloch-Bauer's will, which was written two years before her death, of meningitis, in 1925. In the will, Adele asked her husband, Ferdinand, "to leave my two portraits and the four landscapes by Gustav Klimt" to the National Gallery. "She wrote, 'I am *requesting* my husband,' " Altmann said. "The German word is *ich bitte*—*ich bitte* means I beg, I ask." Besides, Altmann's complaint says, the paintings weren't Adele's to give, since Ferdinand had commissioned them.

"I grew up with the paintings," Altmann said. "My uncle had a memorial room, and in that room was always gorgeous spring flowers all year long, and the Klimts. There was nothing else." In Ferdinand's last will, written in 1945, a month before he died, while he was in exile in Switzerland, he names Altmann and two of her siblings the heirs to his entire estate. Lawyers for Austria maintain that Ferdinand had a legal obligation to fulfill his wife's promise to the Austrian National Gallery—never mind the Nazis—and that the paintings were no longer part of the estate. They believe that, as a matter of foreign policy, the dispute should be handled by the State Department.

The Gold Portrait, one of Klimt's most famous works, and one that has been reproduced countless times—on teapots, mugs, and even shoes ("At Nordstrom, my ex-daughter-in-law bought a pair," Altmann said)—shows Adele seated on a high-backed golden chair wearing a flowing golden gown, with a mop of dark hair. "Adele was like this, you know," Altmann said, holding her pinkie straight. "And she had always a long gold cigarette, and she always wore a long white dress—you know, sort of slinky."

Adele, who was childless, was an admired fin-de-siècle hostess. "I asked my mother, 'Did Adele have an affair with Klimt?,' and she said, 'How dare you say such a thing! It was an intellectual friendship,' " Altmann said knowingly. "He was a good-looking man, and he had oodles of models that he impregnated. And he painted in a long smock down to his sandals and nothing underneath. But—they had an 'intellectual friendship,' my mother said." On Altmann's coffee table was a paperweight with a detail of Klimt's "Salome." "It is Salome, but it is also the head of my aunt," she said. "The torso was practically nude, so officially it was Salome, because it would have been a dead giveaway!"

Altmann occasionally goes to Austria and visits the Klimts. Three years ago, she went with a niece, and posed in front of the Gold Portrait for a photograph. "The guard said, 'You can't do that!' " Altmann recalled. "My niece said, 'That's her aunt.' The guard said, 'Well, why the hell does she hold her hand like that?' "—folded awkwardly in her lap. Altmann explained that her aunt had a deformed finger. "He said, 'She shouldn't have done that! Look at Mrs. Riedler' "—the Klimt portrait of Fritza Riedler, which hung nearby. " 'She holds her hand very nicely.' "



Maria Altmann

—*Dana Goodyear*

Smoke detectors Taximeters Airport screening devices Batteries Exit signs Conveyor belts Diapers Water disinfection Laboratory planning and design High-speed serial data cable assemblies Pneumatic filters Electric valve actuators Warning lights Coffee cups Power strips Strainers Electrical raceways Integrated fire protection cabinets Static control devices PC boards Master terminal boxes Lighting controls Bus and expansion slot connectors Subsystem integration and full-system assembly Variable-flow regulator assemblies Protection against electrical supply interruption Abrasion protection products Vehicle tactical repeaters Air conditioning equipment and systems Multi-coaxial cables Nasopharyngeal sensors Wastewater treatment plant design and engineering Rotational sensors Micro K relays Industrial automation Plastic knives, forks, and spoons Fire and emergency annunciators Drawer connectors LEDs Microelectronic sub-assembly Firefighter breathing systems Ground fault detector protective relays Solenoids Heavy-duty miniature applicators Absorbents and dessicants Voice networks Sea plows for undersea excavation Insulators Medical electrode gels Welded steel tubing Micropatch antennas Filters Thermocouple cables Avionics Polyethylene stretch films Backplane connector systems **Aircraft wire and power cables** Lamps Conformal antennas Serving trays Battery chargers Drills Panel boards Audio receivers Wire basket cable trays Pressure vessel clamps Snow melting mats Matrix switchers Amplitude measurement equipment Salve Telephony analysis Automatic door controls Well cleaners and developers Automotive micro power relays Plastic protective sheeting Patch cable Automotive mini power relays Transmission line accessories hazard detection products Building wraps Vending machine components Scales Intuitive LCD and CRT touchmonitors USB connectors Cable clamps Micropneumatic systems Cable ducting systems Sealants and gels Electrical metallic tubing set-screw connectors and couplings Insulation facers Call center monitoring services Relays with forcibly-guided contacts Spa controls Industrial control hybrids Gas masks Laser rangefinders Sodium bicarbonate based extinguishing agents Flame-retardant drapery systems Resuscitators for infants and children Digital watch parts Shade canopy accessories Barrier strips Chalkboards Therapeutic ultrasound PIN photo diode modules Medical monitoring services Check valves Resin systems Chemical oxygen generators All-in-one touch computers Chartering cable ships Elastic bandages Wireless systems Chillers Semiconductor heat sinks Digital audio services Automotive module relays Surface mounted cabinets Rotary switches Flame retardants Pressure seal closures Electric portable air compressors Circuit breakers Automotive quality inspection equipment Solid-state components Gas discharge tube replacements Components for camcorders Panel indicators Heat isolation devices Explosion-proof detectors Climate monitoring Hazardous material protective suits Solid-state subsystems Signal magnetics Passive electronics Medical oxygen delivery Grounding connectors Telescoping sign support systems Broadband driver amplifiers Champagne glasses Drinking bottles Polymeric and porcelain surge arrestors for distribution and transmission networks Automotive power relays Garment hangers Microcoaxial assemblies Snack food packaging Modem cable assemblies Industrial control switches Continuous-slot metal framing Landfill development Multi-mode radar Patch cable assemblies Shielded and coaxial cable slices Wine glasses Flame-retardant tape Range hoods Halogen-free cables for commercial and offshore applications Absorbable monofilament sutures Cable TV converters Terminals and connectors for underground networks Syringe dispensers Cordless telephone batteries Fire protection systems Tubing for outdoor furniture framing Sensor wraps Easels PIN diodes High-performance solid state relays and power controllers Wire harness tape Ceramic burners Electrical equipment for saunas Cylindrical control connectors Terminals and splices Security systems Relay sockets and accessories Arson detection Galvanized steel tubing Paperboard Counters and timers Sealed connectors Databus assemblies Television sets DC converters Subcutaneous sensors Pipe and tube products Electrical tape High pass filter inductors Pistol grip hand tool systems for IDCs Adhesive tape Segmentally welded pipe fittings USB cables Construction management Deactivators International mains adaptors Suction instruments Test equipment Steel box connectors Calibration equipment and services Plastic tumblers Cable trays Verified audio detection Thermoplastic piping systems Coaxial cable terminators Pigtail cable assemblies Waveguides Plastics engineering Institutional timekeeping Photocopiers Cabled and blind-mate power connectors High-performance connectors Safety relief valves Access floor modules Halogen-free wire Power systems Raised face flanges Connectors for high-voltage substations Flexible non-metallic conduit Reduced wall flexible metal conduit Catheters Medication nebulizers Digital metering systems Wiring harness sockets Automobile steering columns Pediatric monitoring equipment Cable design conductors Flame-retardant tubing for nuclear environments Rooftop walkways Digital products Air sampling equipment Voltage wheels Customized point-of-sale receipts Digital proofing Power tool switches Chokes Medical diagnostics Sound mixers Air traffic control equipment Digital visual interface products Vertical drain membranes and radiant barriers Cabinet power systems Wall track systems DIP switches Resistor protection Thermostats Electrical transformers High-performance RF/microwave antennas Lighting for public services Video cables Thermal circuit breakers Video endoscopy Cable assemblies Irrigation pipe Heat-tracing connectors Potassium bicarbonate-based extinguishing agents Megaphone components Calculators Institutional can liners Voltage-variable attenuators Wafer gear Varactors Coaxial cables Patient monitoring cables Drop cloths Alarms for hazardous areas Power splitters Chassis components Stormwater and wastewater studies Card readers with web-based authentication Printer cable assemblies Engineering services Amusement machine components Dis[illegible] resuscitators Systems for offshore oil and gas installations Patch panels Airport lighting systems Soldering equipment Lon[illegible] cable systems Entry modules Microsurgical needles Cryogenic valves Wiring harness design software Automotive comp[illegible]ated design services Porcelain disc insulators Flex and rigid circuits Diagnostic procedure trays Inkjet fluids Diagnostic an[illegible] testing [illegible] plastic sheeting Rechargeable car flashlights Memory card receptacles Spirometry systems Automatic blood pressure infusers Coated and cloth-backed building and construction tapes Power magnetics Exhausters Ultraviolet disinfection systems Moisture analysis equipment Flange gaskets with bulb elastometers Exotic alloys Professional fire department hardware Custom sterilizable cable assemblies Skin effect trace systems Dental dressings and sutures Parts for lawn and garden equipment Tape measures Flame detectors Ribbon cables Carpet backing Parallel groove clamps Graphic arts tape Extended coverage fire sprinkler heads Hand pumps Climate control monitoring Satellite radio [illegible] audio systems Jacket compounds Galvanized steel armor with PVC jackets Irrigation pumps Utility cabinets Cyanoacrylate [illegible] adhesives Large-screen video projectors Eye pads Arterial extension sets Paper mill wraps Fence framework Distribution panels Continuous timers Protective breathing equipment Special purpose spiral antennas Automatic pick, place and press Power toggle switches Fiber-optic connectors Veterinary medical products Bypass valves Carbon dioxide gas transmitters Specialty chemicals Rainfall gauges Alarms for motor vehicles Water sampling and analysis Fingerprint identification Mobile security systems Cable ties Firefighting flares Multiplier diodes Fireproof cables Drum core magnetics Audio receivers Flexible exhaust connectors Isolators and circulators Magnet wire termination machines Dual hybrids Static measuring equipment Hand-held radios Cable management accessories Steam-tracing products Extrusion laminati[illegible] Parking deck PVC-jacketed metal clad cable Factory automation cables Steelwork fixings Airport construction management instrument winterization Cotton balls Pipe for recreational equipment Self-adhesive cable clips Multi-pair high flexibility cables Fixed cable termination adapters Butterfly valves Portable memory Components for CD recorders and players Telemetry systems Audio production services Integrated molding/plating technology Telephone systems Safety goggles Reverse cutting sutures Decorative shields Temperature and pressure gauges Commercial-quality steel tubing Laser diodes Temperature sensors Connection droppers Dry-erase marker boards Feminine hygiene products Storage tanks Analgesics First aid kits Thermal controls Computer-assisted surgery Power modules Subminiature D connectors Front-connected sockets Digital attenuators Automated teller machine components Spring pin coax probe assemblies Control panels Wet pipe sprinkler systems Alarm verification Security keypads Pain management products Helical gears Roadway and tunnel management systems Printed circuit terminals Galvanized round signposts Rocker and paddle switches Microwave components Roof and gutter heating cables Arson detection Voice amplifiers Fall arrest systems High-voltage connectors Power entry modules Custom broadband networks Steel threadable sprinkler pipe Accounting software Ultrasound cable assemblies Protective clothing for emergency workers Flare launchers Dry pipe systems Cable tie guns Broadband amplifiers Rectangular heavy-duty connectors Discharge devices Vibration dampers Electromagnetic flow readers Laser components Advanced composites Coaxial connectors Adhesive covers Flat steel plates Elastomeric connectors Passive fiber-optic hardware Singulation systems Electrosurgical devices Coffee service kits Automotive radar sensors Electrical metallic tubing compression connectors and couplings Intercommunication devices Customized valves Dry pipe valves Flexible hoses Curing ovens Insulated ground metal clad cables Digital satellite radio antennas Perimeter door and window protection systems Anemometers Cosmetic surgery needles Flexible non-metallic conduit Supply cylinder assemblies Alarm communication systems Identification products Flexible piping equipment Rayon balls

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A REPORTER AT LARGE

NOT POOR ENOUGH

Cassie Stromer's old age.

BY SUSAN SHEEHAN

Cassie Stromer, a petite seventy-six-year-old woman with bottle-blond hair and off-blue eyes, lives in Mount Vernon House, a pleasant four-story red brick apartment complex in Alexandria, Virginia. She has good memories of a colorful past—three husbands, numerous boyfriends, five children, lots of jobs—but her current life is not so good. She was reared in rural Tennessee, and first came to Virginia to work when she was fifteen. She never finished high school. For a short period after separating from the father of her children, she went on welfare, but she found it demeaning. For a while, she worked two full-time jobs, from which she got home at midnight. Cassie doesn't brood over a past marked by poverty. She liked her jobs—at drugstores, at doughnut shops, waiting on tables in restaurants, serving as a hostess at hotels, working in the advertising department of a local newspaper, babysitting.

Cassie is fortunate to live at Mount Vernon House, which opened in 1983; it is one of the few privately owned and operated buildings in northern Virginia subsidized by the Department of Housing and Urban Development. To apply for an apartment there, a single person must be at least sixty-two or disabled and have an annual income no higher than $30,450. Cassie was sixty-eight when she moved there, in 1996. This year, her income will be $9,654—$686 from Social Security every month and a monthly pension of $118.51 from the newspaper, for which she worked for twenty years.

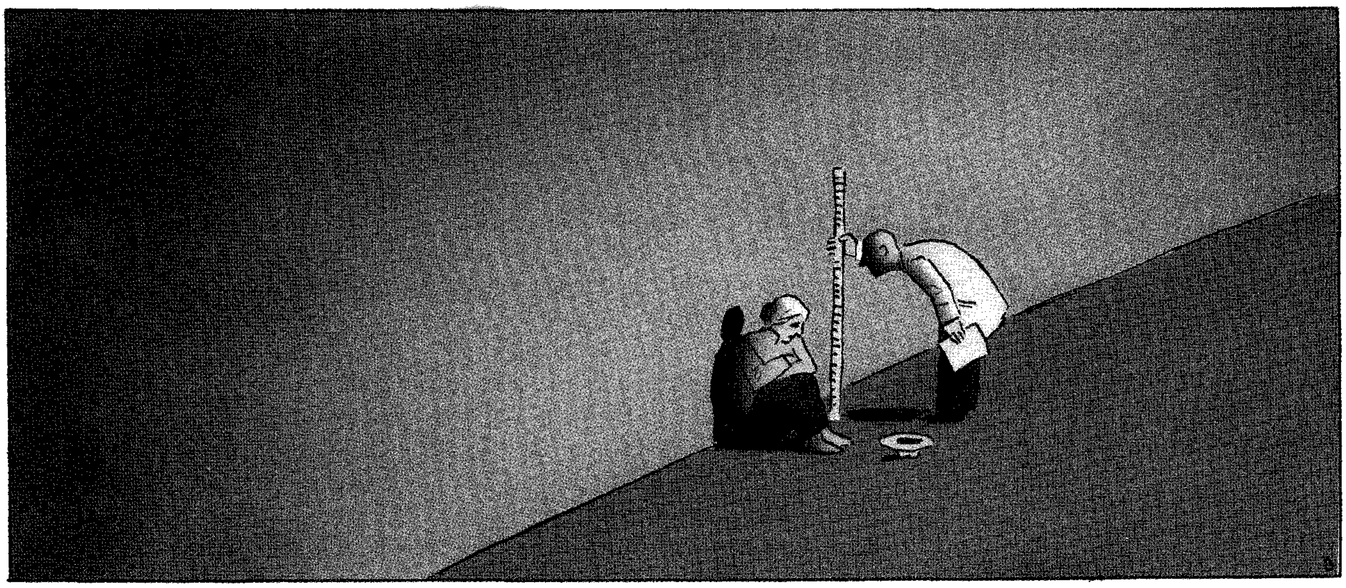
Last year, Cassie's rent was seventy-two dollars a month. "That's on the low end of what our hundred and forty-one residents pay," the property manager for Mount Vernon House, La-Rita Timberlake, says. "As a general rule, residents pay about thirty per cent of their income minus medical bills for rent. HUD makes up the difference."

Cassie Stromer's income puts her in the lowest third of women over sixty-five living alone in America. The official poverty level is $9,310 a year. As it happens, Cassie would be better off if her income were considerably below that amount, rather than some three hundred dollars above it, because her income is regarded as too high for her to receive full Medicaid benefits.

Cassie suffers from neuropathy, a dysfunction of the peripheral nerves, which typically causes numbness or weakness. The neuropathy began in Cassie's big toe ten or twelve years ago; it has spread to her legs, arms, and hands. "I can't do much with my hands," she says. "I can't peel potatoes. When water hits my fingers, they hurt. I can walk, but standing hurts. The tops of my feet feel like people are pouring hot water on them and the bottoms feel like I'm stepping on coals."

In 2003, this is where Cassie's monthly income of $790.51 went after she paid her rent: about $66 for electricity; $50 for her telephone; and $45 for her cable TV. (Television is Cassie's primary form of recreation: she watches several daytime soaps, listens to the news, sometimes looks at the country-music channel, and in the evening watches one or two favorite shows, like "NYPD Blue" or "Law & Order.") Her prescription-drug bills averaged $328 a month. These expenses left Cassie with $230, which was supplemented with ten dollars a month in food stamps, the amount given to individuals who have a net income between $434 and $1,236 a month. Ten dollars has been the monthly minimum payment since 1978; advocates for the poor have been trying, without success, to raise it to twenty-five dollars.

In Alexandria, the Rising Hope United Methodist Mission Church and the United Community Ministries provide bags of groceries for residents who sign up. Still, Cassie estimates that she spends more than a hundred dollars a week on food and other products not covered by food stamps—paper towels, Kleenex, toilet tissue, laundry and cleaning products, toothpaste, shampoo, deodorant, vitamins, and other personal-care items.



Stromer lives on $9,654 a year—three hundred dollars above the poverty line—and is therefore ineligible for full Medicaid benefits.

GUY BILLOUT

"I've gotten away from eating bacon and eggs in the morning," Cassie says. "But I have to start the day with breakfast-type food, like cold cereal. I try to eat a nutritious dinner." She likes to drink juice and milk—and one cup a day of Dunkin' Donuts coffee—and to eat fresh fruit and vegetables, salads, and meat or chicken several evenings a week. A recent dinner consisted of a baked potato with sour cream, a can of asparagus, and some fresh tomatoes (the vegetables were donated by Rising Hope and the United Community Ministries). When her prescription bills and her medical co-payments are on the low side in a given month, she has ten dollars a week to spend on quarters for the washer and dryer, and bus fare. A friend drives her to church most Sundays, and she puts a dollar in the collection plate when she can.

Cassie was born in Harlan, Kentucky, on February 20, 1928, and moved with her parents to the small town of Sneedville, Tennessee, in the early nineteen-thirties. She was the sixth of seven children born to Henry Monroe Depew, a Baptist minister and a farmer, and Mahalie Seals Depew. A sister died as an infant about two years before Cassie's birth, and her younger brother died when she was five.

The family was poor, and one winter, Cassie recalls, "there wasn't enough to eat, so my grandmother stepped in and helped, because she always did a lot of canning." Cassie didn't feel poor, however. Few people in Sneedville were much better off than the Depews, and she didn't resent those who were.

As a child, Cassie had her share of chores—setting out tobacco, chopping chicken heads off with an axe, planting corn—but most of her early memories are warm ones. "I didn't start school until I was eight," she says. That wasn't unusual in the nineteen-thirties. June Seal, a childhood friend, recalls her as an attractive, slender girl with brown hair. Cassie likes to talk about the year she was "the most popular girl in the school." She was a good student.

In 1943, when Cassie was fifteen, she spent the summer in northern Virginia, where an older sister, who was married to a bus driver, was living. For the next several summers, Cassie worked at drugstores in or near Alexandria, staying either with her sister or at a Y or sharing an apartment with a friend. She returned to high school each fall, but stopped going six weeks before graduation. "I'd had enough of geometry and chemistry by then," she says. "I'd learned that poetry was easy to remember, and words that didn't rhyme—I think they call it prose—was hard. I had my high-school ring, and it never mattered that I didn't graduate. When anyone asked me how many years of school I'd done, I said twelve. No one ever asked to see my diploma."

While still in high school, Cassie married a sailor from North Carolina, but after he got out of the Navy she refused to move there with him, and the marriage was annulled. A few years later, she married again. Cassie's second husband, Bob, was a baker. Their first daughter was born in 1951, when Cassie was twenty-three, and their second in 1955. Cassie made babysitting arrangements for her daughters and kept working at a drugstore. Ten days after the birth of her first son, in 1956, she moved with her family from an apartment to a small house that the couple had bought for $13,750 in the Virginia Hills section of Alexandria, and she stopped working. A third daughter was born in 1958, a second son in 1961. "There were no birth-control pills back then," she says. "I guess if pills had been available I'd have had only two children. But once they were born I was glad to have all five."

Cassie enjoyed being home with the children. "I remember watching the first episode of 'General Hospital,' in 1963, while I was ironing clothes for the five kids," she says. For some months, Cassie babysat for another woman's four children in her house. At another point, when Cassie couldn't pay the pediatrician, she took a job at a doughnut shop, working the evening shift until 1 A.M. The marriage deteriorated as Bob began drinking heavily, and she left him, she says, after he hit her during a quarrel. "I took my five kids and my three cents to the house of friends across the street, and they let us stay overnight," she says. Social workers found a house for her to rent in Falls Church, Virginia, but although Cassie occasionally worked part time as a waitress while the older girls took care of their younger siblings, she couldn't make ends meet and had to go on welfare. Bob paid only forty dollars a week in child support. The house in Virginia Hills had appreciated in value, but she learned that her husband had borrowed money against it and hadn't paid the water bills. "There were so many liens against the house I wound up with less than a thousand dollars after it was sold," she says. "I put it in savings accounts in the kids' names and gradually spent it on clothes for them." She lived for a while in a rented house in a run-down neighborhood, and then moved to a series of apartments. She eventually got off welfare, and worked at a variety of jobs. "I'm pretty sure I married Bernie Stromer while I was a keypunch operator," she says. Stromer was the manager of a small hotel in Alexandria. "I'm certain I was attracted to him mostly because he didn't drink. I can't stand alcohol or cigarettes."

Cassie then got a job in the advertising department of the Alexandria *Gazette*. When she was at the newspaper, she was often away from her desk. Stromer would call and then accuse her—falsely, she says—of carrying on a romance with an advertising salesman there. "The one thing worse than a drinking man is a jealous man," she says. "I got a divorce after six years. I sold my three engagement rings and wedding bands to a gold dealer." After the divorce, Cassie worked at the *Gazette* from 7 A.M. to 4 P.M. and at a Peoples Drug from 4:30 P.M. until 11 P.M.

There are eight photograph albums on the top shelf of one of the two closets in Cassie's bedroom at Mount Vernon House. Taped to the pages are photographs of Cassie, starting at the age of seven, and of her children and grandchildren. "My oldest daughter was awarded a full scholarship to Barnard and later graduated from law school," she says. "She never wanted to practice law, so she prepares cases for a law firm in Washington, D.C. My second daughter is divorced. She lives with her older sister and works as a legal secretary. My older son works as a security guard in Tennessee, and he's studying accounting. He has two daughters. One is away at college, the other lives with him and is in high school. My third daughter is happily married. She and her husband have lived in Virginia, California, Mississippi, and Delaware. They've settled in Florida with their two children. They both work. My younger son is single. He's a land surveyor in Virginia." Here and there in the pages of the albums are photographs of Cassie taken at the weddings of her children.

Cassie's children help her out when they can. One of her daughters buys her shoes and also sends her padded socks, which are much more expensive than regular socks but are more comfortable for those suffering from neuropathy. She also sends Cassie checks from time to time, and gave her a forty-dollar Wal-Mart gift certificate last Christmas. One of her sons sent her a check for forty dollars for Christmas. Another daughter is especially helpful, Cassie says, in situations where "there is an emergency or I let her know I really want to do something and I ask her ahead of time"—buying her a hundred and thirty-seven dollars' worth of groceries, for instance, one month when Cassie was out of money. A third daughter telephones often, visits weekly, shops for her, and writes out her checks and mails them, saving Cassie from having to buy stamps. And each week, if there is enough in Cassie's bank account, she withdraws twenty-five dollars for her mother to use as spending money. "The kids got their own lives," Cassie says. "Mortgages or rent, house repairs, car payments, school bills, and vet bills. There's an old saying: 'It takes one mother to take care of five children, but oftentimes five children can't take care of a mother.' "

In one album is the business card of Cassie Stromer, Advertising Manager of the *Gazette*, "America's Oldest Daily Newspaper, Established in 1784,"

RETRO vs METRO

"A smart and sobering analysis"
-George Soros

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Firmly Republican.
Preacher politicians, corporate welfare economies, low-wage jobs and limited tolerance for innovation.

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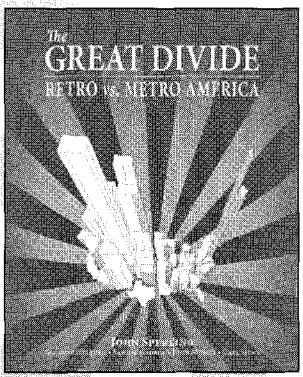

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Your two knees locked, your lower back shock-fast
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A pivot for the tight-braced, tilting rib cage;
The way its iron head planted the sledge
Unyieldingly as a clubfooted last;
The way you had to heft and then half-rest
Its gathered force like a long-nursed rage
About to be let fly—does it do you good
To have known it in your bones, directable,
Withholdable at will,
A first blow that could make air of a wall,
A last one so unanswerably landed
The staked earth quailed and shivered in the handle?

—*Seamus Heaney*

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which was still a daily when Cassie went to work there, in 1970. The *Gazette* later merged with the Alexandria *Port Packet*, and became a weekly. "The company published seven other small papers, and I laid out the ads for the *Walter Reed Stripe*, the *Bolling Beam*, the *Pentagram News*, and the others," she says. In another album is a clipping from the *Gazette* with a photograph of Cassie and a number of her colleagues, taken on the occasion of their production of "14 prize-winning advertisements in the 1988 Newspaper Advertising Contest sponsored by the Virginia Press Association."

Two years later, when Cassie was sixty-two, she returned to work from a vacation and received unwelcome news. "My boss handed me a long list of additional jobs he wanted me to do," she says. "I was already doing the work of two people, so I told him he could take his list and shove it. I quit and gave him an hour and a half's notice."

Cassie worked for a time at an apartment-building switchboard, and then, finally, retired. To supplement her retirement income, she took a job babysitting for the six-week-old twins of a prosperous couple. "Some nights, I also took care of another couple's two children from 6 P.M. until midnight," she says. "They paid me more than I'd ever been paid in my life—sometimes even a hundred dollars a night." Frightened by a number of burglaries in her apartment building, she moved to Mount Vernon House in 1996. She was dating a retired Army enlisted man, and they enjoyed travelling together.

"We often flew, but one time he rented a Lincoln Town Car," she says. "He treated me better than any man I've ever known. He paid for everything. We took trips to Las Vegas, we went to Florida to visit my daughter, to Virginia Beach to visit his daughter, and to Kentucky to visit his son." Eventually, the man decided to move to another part of Virginia. Cassie didn't want to leave Alexandria, and the relationship ended. Afterward, Cassie became depressed, and sought help from a local mental-health center. She continues to see a therapist every two weeks. "I find it easier to talk to psychologists and psychiatrists than to most of my friends," she says. "They listen better." With the therapist's help, Cassie has received prescriptions at nominal cost for Paxil, an anti-depressant, and Trazadone, another anti-depressant. Virginia law requires that everyone taking medication under the aegis of a mental-health agency be seen every three months by a psychiatrist. "I look forward to his visits," Cassie says. "He's handsome."

In 1991, Catherine Cole, a spirited woman now in her early fifties, was hired to be the director of resident services at Mount Vernon House. "Most people who live there are in situations similar to Cassie's," she says. "They weren't born with advantages. They didn't become doctors or lawyers or business executives. They were hairdressers, food-service workers, private-school teachers, auto mechanics, and housekeepers. Some owned homes but couldn't afford to keep them up. Some moved here from trailer parks. The majority have spent most of their adult lives in Fairfax County. A fair number knew at least one other person before they moved here."

There are residents who are less healthy than Cassie. Some women walk around carrying oxygen tanks, a few men and women use wheelchairs. The *Mount Vernon Post*, a monthly newsletter for the residents, recently published a "Lobby Do's and Don'ts" that included "Do NOT BLOW YOUR HORN on motorized scooters in the lobby."

Part of the service director's job is providing entertainment for the residents, and this includes organizing parties to celebrate holidays. At the most recent Halloween party, Cole told Halloween jokes she had found on the Internet, passed out slices of pumpkin pie to the thirty people gathered for the occasion, and handed out prizes for the best costumes. Cassie was wearing a peach-colored top, jacket, and slacks—the closest color she had to orange. She was not among the fifteen residents who showed up, the following week, for a presentation by the Cunningham Funeral Home of Alexandria on the subject of funeral planning.

Regular activities are listed on the calendar published in the *Mount Vernon Post*. At 9:30 A.M. on Tuesdays, the Mount Vernon House van takes residents to a Wal-Mart or a shopping center. On Fridays, Fastran, a Fairfax County shuttle service for the elderly and the handicapped, takes them to a grocery store. Cassie, who doesn't feel well most mornings, prefers to go grocery shopping on weekend afternoons with one of her daughters. She does use Fastran for medical appointments.

A Bible-study group meets at Mount Vernon House on Tuesdays at 4 P.M., and bingo is played at 7 P.M. Movies are often shown on Wednesday evenings. For a while, a swing band rehearsed on Monday evenings in the lobby. The service director arranges occasional trips to dinner theatres in the Washington area and to the American Music Theatre, in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. "The Lancaster trip costs forty-six dollars, but you can pay in installments," Cassie says. "Two of my daughters will pay for me to go on outings, but the bus ride to Lancaster is long and it shakes you to pieces."

Each year, the Mount Vernon House Tenants' Association raises money for a Christmas dinner by holding a bazaar. The most recent dinner included ham, turkey, stuffing, succotash, green beans, sweet potatoes, mashed potatoes, gravy, cranberry sauce, rolls, apple crisp, and pumpkin pie with whipped cream. Cassie observed that most of the Asian residents sat at one long table and most of the Latinos at another, and that the two or three people who hang out together every day in the lobby sat together and didn't talk to anyone else. "This place is more clannish than junior high school," she said. Still, when a friend came over to her apartment to address Christmas cards to people from Sneedville, the *Gazette*, and other chapters of her life (Cassie's ability to write is limited by her neuropathy and by macular degeneration), she studied the Mount Vernon House directory and chose cards for forty-nine residents, and signed "Love, Cassie" on each card. Cassie keeps the cards that she receives each Christmas until she has dispatched her cards the following December. She was sad when she came across the card that her friend Lucille had sent her. Seven or eight residents of Mount Vernon House, among them Lucille, died the previous year. "I miss Lucille," Cassie says. She also misses another friend, named Warren, who left her his collection of Beanie Babies. Cassie can't afford to send her grandchildren birthday and Christmas presents, but she has been sending Beanie Babies to her youngest granddaughter, who wrote her a thank-you note.

Ellen Cook, a large cheerful woman with only two upper front teeth, is among a handful of original residents, as is Cassie's friend Rachel Tucker, a lively, hundred-and-one-year-old African-American woman, who goes out nearly every day to visit one of her sons, who is blind. "Rachel can still thread a needle without using glasses," Cassie says admiringly. Rachel is the only resident with a key to Cassie's apartment. When Cassie prepares a dinner of baked chicken, egg noodles, and canned kale, she delivers a plate to Rachel. When Rachel fixes ribs, cabbage, or tapioca pudding, she takes some to Cassie.

Mount Vernon House is not an assisted-living facility. Its residents must be able to fend for themselves. Housekeeping help is provided by a county program called Share Care, and, once every week or so, someone comes to change Cassie's bed, scrub her bathroom and kitchen, and vacuum the worn indoor-outdoor carpeting that covers the concrete floor in the bedroom, living room, and hall.

"It's enlightened fiscal policy to enable residents to stay at Mount Vernon House," Cathy Cole says. "Assisted-living facilities are far more expensive, and they're rarely subsidized."

The medical needs of most of this country's old or disabled citizens fall under the jurisdiction of two Great Society programs created in 1965, Medicare and Medicaid. Medicare, a federal system of health insurance available to old people generally, does not provide full medical coverage. Medicaid is jointly administered by the federal government and the states, and covers medical costs for individuals and families with low incomes or with disabilities. Within broad national guidelines, each of the fifty states determines the income at which its residents become eligible for Medicaid. In Virginia, an old person with insignificant assets is eligible for comprehensive Medicaid benefits only if her personal income is no higher than eighty per cent of the poverty level, or $7,448. For those whose income, like Cassie's, is no higher than a hundred and twenty per cent of the poverty level, Medicaid does pay some of the Medicare premiums, but not the first hundred dollars in doctor bills that Cassie incurs each year, and she has to pay twenty per cent of the "usual and customary" fees that doctors charge for their services or, if she is admitted to a hospital, the $876 deductible for a hospital stay of up to sixty days.

Last November, after much debate, Congress significantly modified the Medicare program, authorizing it, for the first time in its history, to bear some of the costs of prescription drugs. The bill doesn't go into effect until 2006, but people whose income is less than $12,576 are now eligible to apply for an annual transitional benefit amounting to a six-hundred-dollar credit on various prescription cards. The new prescription-card system is cumbersome, however, and many of those who are eligible for the cards, including Cassie, find the application process too complicated to follow. Even with the cards,

"Put the punster in with the mime."

Cassie would be left with the prospect of having to pay thousands of dollars in additional prescription bills this year and next year.

On one visit to the pharmacy, Cassie had five prescriptions filled. Three were to alleviate the pain of neuropathy—Ultram, Keppra, and lidocaine patches (which she applies to the tops of her feet for twelve-hour periods). The fourth, Patanol drops, soothes her eyes, easing the unpleasantness of macular degeneration. The fifth, potassium pills, relieves cramps in her legs. The pharmacy bill that day came to $562.45. Last year, Cassie's entire pharmacy bill was $3,940.50.

"Up until I retired, my health was pretty good," Cassie says. "I was busy working and raising five children and putting one foot in front of the other, and I think it's lucky I couldn't see further down the road, to where I am today—on the borderline of Medicare and Medicaid, which ain't a nice place to be."

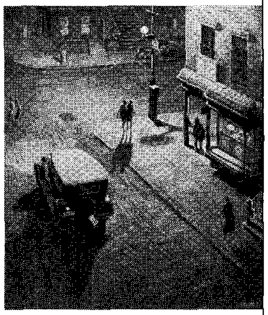
"I'd estimate that about one-third of Mount Vernon House's residents are eligible for Medicaid and another few have private health insurance," Cathy Cole says. "The majority, however, fall between the cracks. Their income is a couple of hundred dollars a month too high for them to qualify for Medicaid, and with Medicare alone they cannot afford to pay for all of their medical costs."

Cassie's only hope of qualifying for comprehensive Medicaid—and then only for a period of up to six months at a time—is to be placed on a "spend-down." Mount Vernon House gives residents like Cassie a plastic envelope and tells them to put all their medical bills in it—their co-pays, their prescription bills, and their receipts for all out-of-pocket medical expenses, including transportation to medical appointments. The spend-down is calculated by taking Cassie's monthly income—$790.51 in 2003—and first subtracting a twenty-dollar "disregard." $770.51 is multiplied by six, which amounts to $4,623.06. That figure is then compared with the "medically needy" figure for a single person in northern Virginia, which is $2,071 for a six-month period. The difference, $2,552.06, is Cassie's spend-down. If, in a six-month period, she has $2,552.06 in medical expenses, she will qualify for Medicaid for the remainder of that six-month period. In the eight years that Cassie has been at Mount Vernon House, she has met the Medicaid spend-down once. "It was wonderful to have a Medicaid card," Cassie says. "Prescriptions cost me only a dollar or two apiece. But, by the time I'd met the spend-down amount, the six months of Medicaid coverage was almost up, and before I knew it I was without Medicaid again." A friend remembers coming to visit Cassie at Mount Vernon House. "She was in pain, but she cut one of the pills she took for neuropathy in half, because it was expensive," the friend says.

"People like Cassie believe that their problem lies in having too much income," Steven L. Myers, the executive director of the Virginia Poverty Law Center, says. "In my opinion, the problem is, rather, that Virginia's Medicaid eligibility—eighty per cent of poverty—is too low. We struggled to get the General Assembly to raise it from seventy-four per cent to eighty per cent. That six-per-cent increase was helpful to thousands of people. I know of one woman who spent down and qualified for Medicaid a few years ago. She was on that spend-down long enough to get a free pair of prescription eyeglasses. Now Virginia Medicaid no longer covers eyeglasses. Spend-downs work for some people with catastrophic illnesses. They don't work for people with chronic health problems. I'm convinced that most upper-income people in the country don't know that our safety-net programs aren't as generous as they believe them to be. They assume that the aged, the blind, and the disabled receive Medicaid at a hundred per cent of poverty. Virginia is a very bad place in which to be elderly and poor."

Cassie Stromer is a fastidious person. After she makes coffee, she doesn't simply rinse out the drip machine's glass carafe; she fills it with fresh water, puts a filter in the plastic cone, and boils the water. Every couple of months, she pours vinegar into the carafe, boils the vine-

SWANN
AUCTIONS



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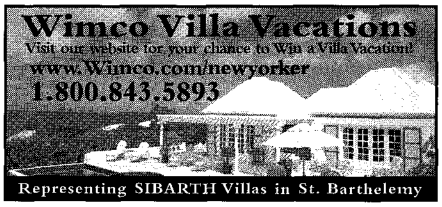

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gar, and then repeats the process with water to get rid of the vinegar's pungent odor. She changes her towels and bed linens frequently. The laundry room at Mount Vernon House is less than ideal, she says. "Just four washers and dryers, and sometimes one is broken."

Before Cassie puts fifty cents in a washer, she sprays Lysol in it, and before inserting coins in the dryer she empties the lint tray. She usually doesn't leave the laundry room until her clothes are dry. "People waiting for a machine will change the delicate cycle to high heat so your clothes will be done faster, and that'll ruin them," she says. "Other times, they'll take out your things when they're still wet and they'll use what's left of your money to dry their own clothes."

That happened one day last year, when Cassie left her quilt in a dryer unattended and returned to her apartment. She was already upset because earlier in the day someone had reported her for using two machines at a time and she had been reprimanded. "If I use one machine at a time, I'll be in the laundry room for seven hours," she says. "That's my whole day. And that's the only rule I ever break. Everyone should be allowed to break one goddam rule. I've never reported anyone for using two machines." When Cassie discovered the damp quilt on top of the dryer, she carried it back to her apartment, hung it over the shower rod in her bathroom, and turned on the heat lamp. She owned only one quilt and wanted it on her bed by evening. She started to walk toward her La-Z-Boy recliner in the living room and collided with a small table in the hall that held her microwave. She fell, bumping her head. She lost consciousness briefly, came to, picked herself up, and made it to the recliner. A friend stopped by, saw the bump, and dialled 911. An ambulance took her to a nearby hospital, where she spent six days, returning to Mount Vernon House the day before Thanksgiving. She had been "peeked at and poked at" by numerous doctors—all of whom subsequently sent bills—and had had many X-rays and CAT scans. She had not broken any bones, but she had broken her lower denture. The denture had been made some fifteen or twenty years earlier, when she was still at the *Gazette* and had dental insurance. There is virtually no dentistry that the poor can afford in Virginia; even Medicaid offers dental benefits only to children.

When Cassie received an unexpected rent rebate check from Fairfax County for a hundred dollars later that month, she cashed the check and stashed the hundred dollars in her bedroom, thinking that she might be able to save up for new dentures. Her mouth felt uncomfortable without the lower plate, and she couldn't easily chew meat or raw broccoli, celery, and carrots, which are among her favorite foods.

In January, Cassie's ophthalmologist prescribed TobraDex drops to relieve some irritation in her left eye. When a neighborhood pharmacy delivered the prescription, the bill was $63.23. Cassie had only seventeen dollars. "Shit, shit, shit," she said as she walked to the bedroom and took out fifty dollars of the squirrelled-away hundred dollars. She gave the delivery boy sixty-five dollars—the sum she owed and a tip.

As Cassie's birthday approached, in February, she had only twenty dollars left in her bedroom cache: she had dipped into the denture fund to buy groceries. She telephoned the dentist who had made her original dentures and learned that new ones would cost twenty-seven hundred dollars, but he encouraged her to bring in the broken lower denture. "If the break is clean, I can glue it together and that would last for a while," he said. Cassie had him do the glue repair.

In May, Cassie got some good news. Because of a formula involving her medical expenses, her rent was being reduced from $72 a month to $42. In September, however, she received a notice from the state, telling her that her $58 Medicare premium would no longer be covered, meaning that she would have to pay it herself.

Earlier this month, Cassie's lower denture broke again. "This time it shattered," she says. "It's harder to eat now. I can't really chew anything." She has to cut her food up into small pieces. She says there's nothing she can do about it. "I don't have any more money today than I did last February, and I won't have any more tomorrow." ◆

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AN ANNOUNCEMENT

BY MARK SINGER

I don't want people saying they didn't see this coming, they were caught completely off guard, why didn't he warn us, any of that. If guys like Mike Eisner and Jay Leno have the courtesy to give a heads-up, there's no reason for me to be coy. So I'm telling the world right now: I'm going to retire. Any great enterprise must be willing to make personnel adjustments, even at the very top, when circumstances dictate. I recognize that it will one day make sense for me to withdraw from hands-on management of Mark Singer Global Diversified Cottage Industries, whose core endeavor—the writing of magazine articles and the once-every-few-years book—I've now guided through three decades of consistent incrementalism. Even as I lay the groundwork for my transition to emeritus status, I've continued to appraise the merits and potential pitfalls of my projected scenario for October 19, 2015, when I intend to "celebrate" my sixty-fifth birthday by driving to the most conveniently situated bridge and pitching over the railing my laptop computer, which will serve as a tidy stand-in for all the word-processing devices I've been chained to across the decades.

Questions are bound to arise regarding the short- and long-term impact of this decision upon the Mark Singer brand, which has become synonymous with glacially slow wordsmithing in the pursuit of middlebrow accessibility. Let me address some of those.

Does Mark Singer Global Diversified Cottage Industries possess valuable contingent assets?

Possibly, several, though predicting their cash equivalency is no simple matter. I continue to believe, for instance, in the marketability of "Silly Silly Juxtapositions," the prototype of the "irony flash cards" that I developed twenty years ago, when I first became concerned about the interpretative challenges that preschool-age children confront in coming to terms with postmodern cultural dislocation.

I retain extensive notes for scathing biographies of Wayne Calhoun and Phil Dooley, who, in 1960, hoisted my new bicycle to the top of the school flagpole, let go of the rope, and claimed that it had "slipped." Could such viscerally experienced raw material be entrusted, during my golden-years phase, to the imagination of a ghostwriter? If not, perhaps Wayne and Phil, who went on to lucrative careers in, respectively, gravel processing and agricultural waste management, could be approached by some buffed-out hirelings armed with blunt objects and be persuaded to render a reasonable tribute—a way of saying, more than a half century later, "Hey, what we did was sort of wrong."

The possibility also exists that a rich body of epic poetry might effloresce from meditations upon the mystical qualities of certain of my household possessions—my underutilized NordicTrack, the back-yard hammock where I so often lay while pondering how soon the stately hemlock infested with woolly-adelgid blight would land on the house, the snowblower that brought such manly pleasure to me and my neighbor Ralph. Or, in the event that my surrogates fail to grasp the inspirational promise of these non-liquid assets, they might nevertheless, in the context of a garage sale, be monetized.

What about contingent liabilities?

Assuming that the statute of limitations has expired for tax-fraud prosecution for fiscal 1997-1999—when, owing to accounting and/or document-archiving irregularities, I neglected to retain receipts for postage expenditures that I went ahead and claimed anyway on Schedule C of my tax returns—none.

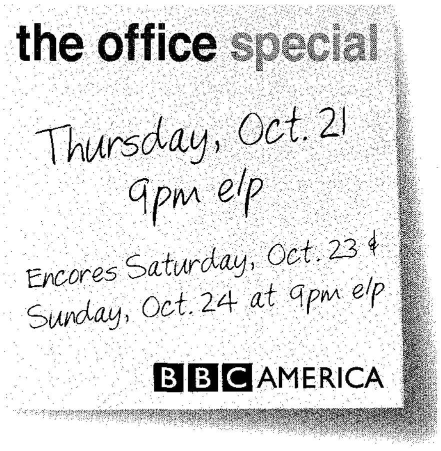
Once I've formally ceded authority, who will be in charge of day-to-day operations?

I'm aware of criticism that my micromanagerial tendencies and allegedly combative style as a chief executive have undermined what might otherwise be an orderly process of designating a successor. Yet I wonder if these detractors fully appreciate the inherent difficulty of cultivating a protégé within what is essentially a one-person organization. To cite just one timely example: during the interval between the composition of the previous paragraph and the building up of steam to segue to this one, I replaced a light bulb, folded the laundry, ate a snack, brushed my teeth after a refreshing nap, began alphabetizing last year's Christmas cards, and chatted with a telemarketer about the weather in Lahore. In addition, even as I've been writing this essay I've been simultaneously ignoring the deadlines for four others. Easy enough, you say? Try it.

Yes? And? The point?

I'm reminded (who could forget?) of that awfully-sure-of-himself reviewer of my memoir of my adolescent years, "Stuff I Wish Hadn't Happened," who noted, "What we have here is a prime specimen of the classic roomful-of-monkeys school of composition and editing." Beneath the surface of this rebuke would seem to lurk an inadvertent vision for the ongoing viability of Mark Singer Global Diversified Cottage Industries during the post-Mark Singer era. To which I can only say, sure, technically speaking, some number of chimpanzees, if properly incentivized, might be expected to churn out prose in a voice that would approximate my own. But could they also be relied upon to replicate my probably unique repertoire of writing-avoidance strategies? Please.

In brief, what Mark Singer Global Diversified Cottage Industries is experiencing is a natural evolutionary process. You're born, they send you to school, you settle into a career (or a checkered employment history), you occasionally contemplate the whole dust-to-dust thing, and when you finally retire maybe you get replaced by a relative youngster, maybe by a primate, or maybe you're just terminally downsized. Yes, things change. In the meantime, there are horizons to be glimpsed, perseverance to demonstrate, clocks (or irritating individuals) to be punched. Work remains to be done—or, depending upon my mood, put off until after I've tested the batteries in the smoke detector. ♦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LETTER FROM VIETNAM

ACROSS THE RIVER STYX

The mission to retrieve the dead.

BY CAROLINE ALEXANDER

Padded ear protectors had transformed the thunking of the helicopter's blades to a bland white noise, enhancing the sense of dreamlike remoteness with which we drifted over fields of shining paddy. Standing starkly in one green field, a woman wearing a pale, conical hat shaded her eyes to watch us. Hills appeared and the ground became less lush, patched with raw brown and covered with the green scrub of secondary growth. Shortly afterward, we landed on the southern slope of the Dong Ma Mountain, in Quang Tri Province in central Vietnam. Thirty-six years ago, in April of 1968, a patrol of ten American soldiers was ambushed from this hill, and a young G.I. lost his life. The men and women I had come to meet were here to retrieve what they could find of his body.

A short trail led through scrub vibrating with cicadas to a rough shelter made of bamboo and blue plastic awning. It was a hundred and three degrees, and the humidity registered at sixty-three per cent. Beyond the shelter's blue shade, on a precarious slant, a small band of diggers subjected the hillside to a tidy but determined excavation.

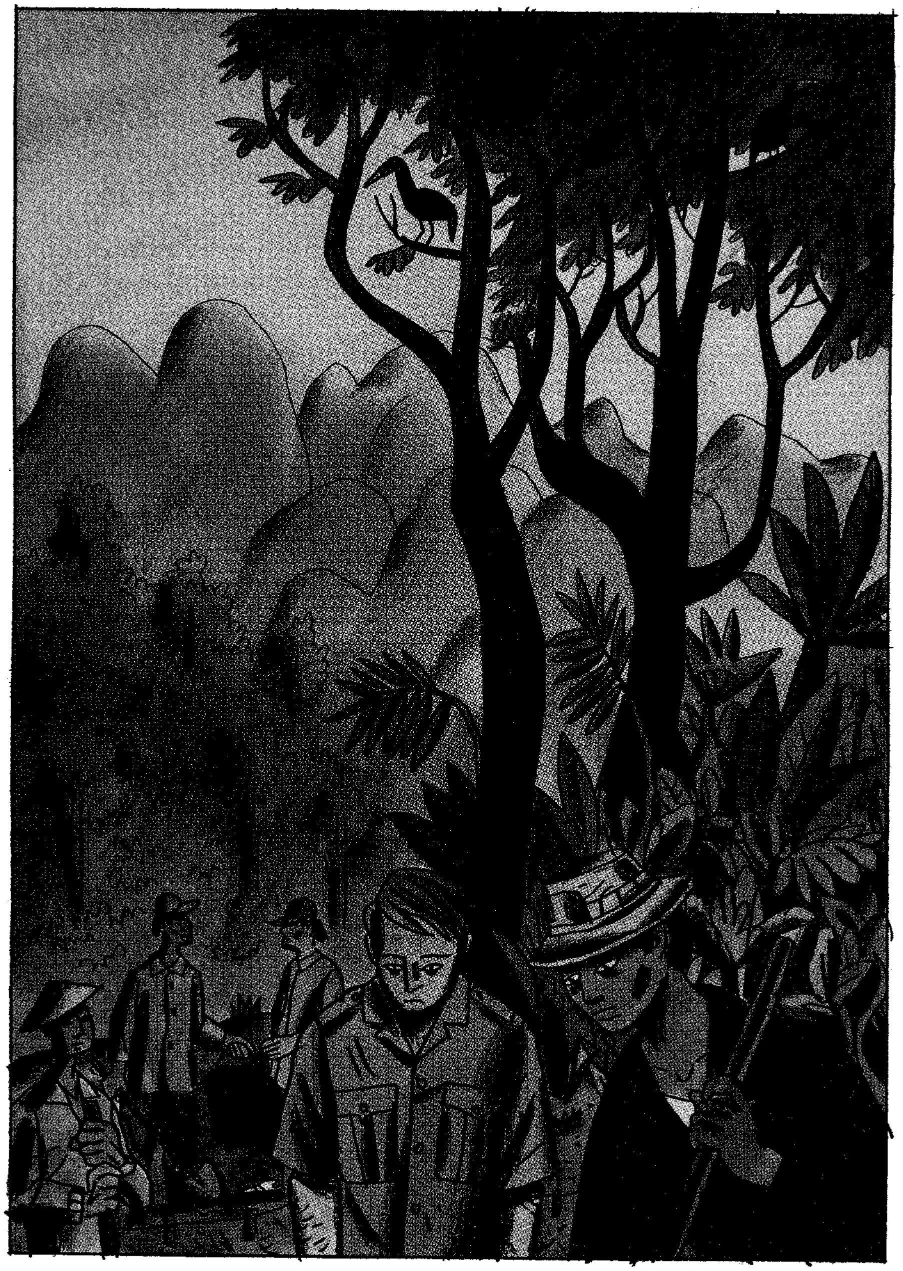
The eleven members of Recovery Team 4 at work on Hill 328, as Dong Ma Mountain was prosaically called during what was known here as the American War, had been deployed in Vietnam by the Joint P.O.W./M.I.A. Accounting Command (JPAC). Operating under the Department of Defense, JPAC is the largest of five units—with a collective annual budget of a hundred and four million dollars—that are dedicated to retrieving and identifying the remains of American military personnel across the globe.

Work on Hill 328 was monitored by Captain Charles Gatling. Tall, dark, and energetic, the thirty-three-year-old team leader could often be found in the pit, churning out shovelfuls of dirt with large, capable hands. He espoused a theory of leadership based on communication and "caring about your people." The latter point, he said, "is just part of your upbringing."

Every member of Team 4 was a veteran of previous recovery missions. "Most here have been in the military for seven or so years—they stay because they like it," Captain Gatling told me. "They are the kind of people who like getting on with people." Civilians, he allowed, could be more problematic, although the "doctors are very focussed"; the "doctors" were the civilian anthropologists, assigned to each recovery team, who direct the actual excavations. The "anthro" of Team 4 was Dr. Elizabeth Martinson Goodman, or Zib, an athletic, golden-haired woman in her early thirties. Zib grew up on an apple orchard in Washington State. She characterized the recovery excavations as "honest, healthy work."

"Archeologists usually excavate habitation sites, or burial grounds," she said, gesturing toward the pit. "There is a moral clarity to this kind of work—you are not plundering graves."

Mapped out into a grid of three-by-three-metre squares, the pit was cleared by a bucket line that extended up the hill to a screening station. The soil was dumped into one of twelve hanging screens, then passed through quarter-inch mesh and examined for artifacts and biological matter; most excavations turn up only fragmentary remains. Each hour on site was broken into forty minutes of hard work, followed by twenty minutes of rest, during which both American and Vietnamese workers retreated to the shade of their respective shelters. Under a kind of leafy bower on a ridge of the hill, Vietnamese government officials, who accompany every mission, had their own small camp, from which smoke or the steam of a pot on the boil occasionally escaped.



JACQUES DE LOUSTAL

The retrieval of a soldier's remains can require years of investigation and labor.

Along with the medic, the linguists, the forensic photographer, the Life Support Technician, and the Mortuary Affairs Specialist, an essential component of every recovery team is the Explosive Ordnance Disposal Technician, whose job is to handle those tricky situations which arise when a shovel hits suspect metal or, as happened on my first day, someone finds that the stubborn lump of clay dumped into his screen contains an unexploded grenade. Team 4's ordnance expert was Staff Sergeant Carl Traub, whose placid, unlined face belied his chosen trade. Traub described his decision to handle live explosives as a "career move."

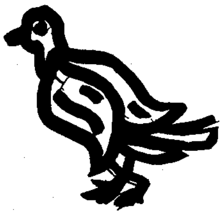
"You want a critical job," he drawled in a Tennessee accent, through chewing tobacco. "It was this or counter-intel, but I didn't speak any language other than redneck." Sergeant Traub's principal preoccupation, much discussed during the breaks, was his desire to return home in time for his tenth wedding anniversary. Yet when a yelp of alarm was raised, Traub moved swiftly toward the object from which everyone else was fleeing, and grasped it with a practiced hand. The first grenade, an M-79 40-millimetre fragmentation, he declared to be inert; the second, a Vietnamese fragmentation hand grenade with a pin so rusty it might easily slip from its spoon, was another matter. "Has anyone got a penny?" he asked, and afterward pronounced the grenade "good to go." In all, fifty explosive devices were neutralized on the site. "They sometimes know only one thing," Gatling later said of the ordnance technicians. "But they are seriously good. Personal safety is not an issue for him," he said of Traub, matter-of-factly, offering a glimpse of the unnatural code required in war.

JPAC is authorized to deploy up to four hundred and twenty-five civilian and military personnel, drawn from all branches of the services. The unit is headquartered at Hickam Air Force Base, Hawaii, where JPAC maintains the largest and most sophisticated forensic-anthropology laboratory in the world. There are also JPAC detachments in Thailand, Laos, and Vietnam. The four other units handle everything from policy issues to highly specialized forensic analysis, but it is JPAC that is responsible for the actual field work of identifying sites and excavating remains, at an annual cost of more than fifty million dollars. JPAC maintains eighteen professional recovery teams, of ten to fourteen members each, which are typically assisted by anywhere from ten to a hundred local laborers. The teams' areas of deployment span the earth: the forests of Panama, remote Pacific islands, Okinawa, Indonesia, China, and the jungles of Papua New Guinea; a sixteen-thousand-foot-high ice face in Nepal, a mountain ledge in Laos, Russia, the fields and forests of Europe, underwater in the Pacific, the deserts of North Africa and North Korea. With the exception of a lone M.I.A. from the Gulf War, the losses in Southeast Asia are not only the most recent but also the most politically charged.

"Vietnam was significant because it saw the beginning of grassroots and particularly family pressure on our government," Larry Greer, an official at the Defense P.O.W./Missing Personnel Office, one of JPAC's four associated units, told me. Faced with anger over the mounting deaths—the final reckoning would reach more than fifty-eight thousand—the government dramatically expanded its commitment to retrieval. "This was a lobby group of wives," said Greer. "Frankly, what you're seeing today is a result of this; this was a generation that had come of age in the sixties, very vocal and effective."

The lobbying led to the establishment, in 1973, of the U.S. Army Central Identification Laboratory, headquartered initially in Thailand and then in Hawaii, where it was known as CILHI. In 2003, JPAC was formed when CILHI merged with Joint Task Force-Full Accounting, which had been established more than a decade earlier to address the issue of P.O.W.s and M.I.A.s in Southeast Asia.

"The United States is the only country that does what we do in the way we do it," Greer said. JPAC's stated mission is to achieve "the fullest possible accounting of all Americans missing as a result of our nation's previous conflicts." The epic scale of this undertaking is revealed in blunt statistics. There are an estimated eighty-eight thousand unrecovered remains from the Gulf War, the Vietnam War, the Cold War, the Korean War, and the Second World War—the conflicts named in JPAC's mission statement. More than half of these are acknowledged as being currently unrecoverable: an estimated forty-three thousand Second World War fatalities, for example, are, as JPAC's language puts it, "entombed" deep in the Pacific. More than forty-five thousand are in theory obtainable. JPAC identifies approximately a hundred and ten remains each year. At this rate, barring fresh losses in new arenas of conflict, it will take the United States government four hundred and nine years to make good its pledge.



In early April, 1968, during the rainy season, a ten-man patrol set out on foot from artillery firebase Camp Carrol for Hill 328, just north of Highway 9, where a North Vietnamese position was suspected under cover of an outcrop of rock. The patrol spent the night on the mountainside, and continued its way up at dawn; just after noon it was ambushed and the leader of the patrol was killed under heavy fire. Other members, badly wounded, had been unable to retrieve his body.

"He fell with a thud, and his armor clattered upon him"; "the spirit left him, and a dark mist seeped over his eyes." So the deaths of even minor players are commemorated in the Iliad, the definitive chronicle of war, and the reader is kept mindful that every casualty has a name, parents who will mourn, perhaps a wife, some small, frugal history. It is to the specifics of such often lonesome deaths within the grand campaigns that the JPAC researchers first turn when commencing their investigations. Each Loss Incidence File contains everything known about the events that led to death—official reports, maps, anecdotes told by companions of the patrol, by enemy combatants, oral histories by local witnesses. In 1968, the members of the ambushed patrol had returned twice to recover their leader's body. In the second attempt, five weeks after the ambush, another marine lost his life. Of special significance are those JPAC cases that can begin at a place where reliable witnesses locate the deceased as L.K.A.—Last Known Alive. Reminiscences that, decades later, are perhaps fuzzier, perhaps more burnished, are given full and serious attention: *We scattered, we came together, we ran to the west, we crawled down. . . . I saw him lying ahead of me, he was running to my right under the ridge, he was moving toward the trail.*

All the Southeast Asian cases have been physically investigated at least once, and many repeatedly (the identities and full details of each case are withheld, pending notification of the family). The general area relating to the case under Recovery Team 4's excavation had been investigated in 1993, and was revisited for investigation in 1996, when a villager came forward who claimed to have buried the remains all those years ago in a bomb crater near where the body had fallen. In 1997, with only days left to a mission, an item imprinted with the letters "-ta" was found, and identified by the team's Life Support Technician, an expert in military equipment of the time, as part of a military-issue jungle boot, whose brand name, Bata, was stamped on the sole. In 1999, JPAC excavators returned to dig the depression but were unsuccessful. The site was again investigated in 2003, and a second crater was recommended for excavation, but when work resumed in March, 2004, this was soon identified, by its neatly finished sides and a cache of unspent 7.62-millimetre round cartridges, as an N.V.A. observation post. However, some distance north of the first crater, in a pit used by local scavengers, the team unearthed C-ration wrappers, the remains of a poncho, water bottles, insect repellent, a field protection mask, and the upper portion of the Bata boot discovered in 1997. On the second day of digging, excavators found a tooth.

With the threat of an approaching storm, Captain Gatling told the Vietnamese workers to leave early. From the hill's height of four thousand feet, we had a commanding view over the foothills immediately below, out to the expansive plain that bounds the Cam Lo River—the kind of broad, flat terrain on which, when conventional battles had been the rule, armies would have clashed. Behind us, on the other side of Hill 328, to the north, lay the D.M.Z. The topographical map of the region also listed defunct towns and hamlets: Dinh Dien Hoan Cat, Cam Chinh, Thôn Minh Huong—all noted as "Destroyed." Below the hill, the departing workers could be seen descending in single file toward the plain. An aerial photograph of this terrain, taken in 1968, resembles a rare color image from the First World War—a blur of raw earth, the jagged stumps of blasted trees, everything washed with the sepia tone of mud. From the vantage of the hill, the patrol that had made its way toward the outcrop must have been visible long before the soldiers strayed into enemy range. Some of the workers now returning may have heard the story of the dead American before the arrival of Recovery Team 4. I had received only one directive from Mr. Sun, the Vietnamese official accompanying the team: "Please don't speak with the workers." This request could have been prompted by any number of reasons, but one, undoubtedly, was to forestall the predictable line of inquiry—"Did anyone in your village know about this dead man? What did your father do in the war . . . ?"

Recovery Team 4 was billeted in the town of Dong Ha, some twenty-two kilometres from the site, and the principal town of Quang Tri Province. An important combat base was formerly on its outskirts, where, during April and May of 1968—the time of the fatal patrol—the Battle of Dong Ha took place, ending with the loss of some twenty-six hundred lives, more than two thousand of them North Vietnamese. To a casual visitor, Dong Ha showed few scars of its recent war. It was now a bustling town, its dusty thoroughfare lined with handsome two-story houses built in French-colonial fashion, with ornate balconies on the upper floors. Open-fronted shops were packed with goods, and fresh fruit of the season—jackfruit, bananas, star fruit—could be bought in the market. The team stayed in two basic but pleasant hotels, where slow-turning ceiling fans gently batted mosquitoes away; guests wishing not to be disturbed could hang on their doors a sign bearing the all-purpose phrase "Please Don't Bother."

After the second day at the dig, I drove with Mr. Sun and other government officials thirty minutes north to the Truong Son Cemetery. Set on a hill amid landscaped parkland, the cemetery covered almost a hundred and fourteen acres and was, according to Mr. Sun, who knows Washington, D.C., the equivalent of Arlington National Cemetery. Short, youthful-looking, and shy, Mr. Sun became eloquent, and, waving toward the rows of neat markers presided over by a shrine to Ho Chi Minh, told me that "the people wish to honor the heroes." Each headstone bore two dates, those on the top line most commonly 1950, 1951, 1952, and, less frequently, 1945, 1946; those on the bottom, 1965, 1966, 1970-something. Sticks of incense filled the small containers placed on each slab. The cemetery, in a landscaped complex fashioned in the shape of a flower, contains the graves of 10,327 Vietnamese soldiers.

The exact number of Vietnamese killed in the war is unknown, but it approaches, conservatively, two million. The unrecovered military dead—the Vietnamese M.I.A.s—number approximately three hundred thousand. In traditional Vietnamese culture, the site of death is held to be of great importance, and so the missing dead are a matter of enormous religious as well as emotional concern for surviving families. If death occurs in an unfamiliar place, the soul of the deceased may take fright and wander, perhaps causing much mischief before it can be coaxed, by incense and prayer, to the family's ancestral altar.

"It is hard," one Vietnamese official later told me in Hanoi. "We go into villages and women appear saying, 'My sons are missing and you are looking for the American dead.' "

The ritual of retrieval of fallen warriors from enemy hands represents one of the few time-honored civilities of war, dating at least as far back as 750 B.C., the approximate date of the Iliad, ever the first and enduring authority on war. "Revere the gods, Achilles," Homer's King Priam says, imploring pity, as he begs the victorious Achilles for the body of his son, Hektor. "I have endured such as no other mortal man upon earth; I have taken to my lips the hands of the man who killed my child." It is not the hero's death but the petition for his body that is the epic's emotional climax.

The Americans' retrieval of their dead from Vietnam is accepted by both sides as a necessary condition for the normalization of relations between the two countries. Ironically, the previous lobbying for accountability of the missing had helped delay the rapprochement that would make this possible. Rumors of American P.O.W.s languishing in remote camps in the jungles of Laos continued to stoke anguish and distrust long after the war had ended. In 1991, the United States Senate, led by Senators John McCain and John Kerry, both veterans and McCain himself a former P.O.W., authorized an investigation of the P.O.W./M.I.A. issue. The conclusion—after eighteen months of intense, on-site investigation—was that there were no remaining P.O.W.s in Southeast Asia. In 1994, twenty-one years after the signing of the Paris Peace Agreement, and nineteen years after the fall of Saigon, normalization was begun with the lifting of the trade embargo. Nonetheless, even as relations progress between the two nations, any new P.O.W. "sighting" continues to be scrupulously examined.

"We have had two hundred or so live sightings investigated," Lieutenant Colonel Thomas Smith, the commander of JPAC's Vietnamese Detachment, told me at a pre-mission briefing in Hue. "Not a

"I'm even better off than I was four years ago."

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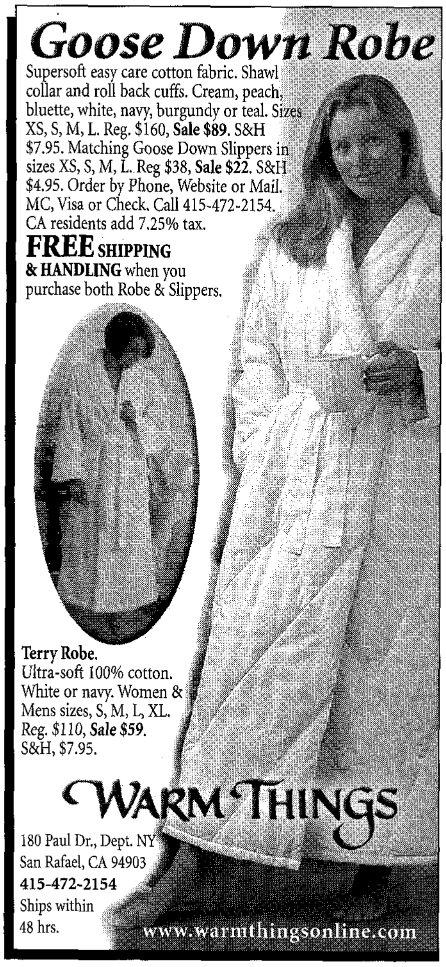

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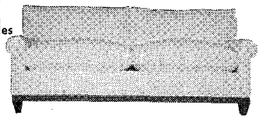

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single one was credible." One investigation of a group of Americans spotted wandering through the jungle found only another investigative team. The electrifying report of an African-American sergeant held under guard in chains in the forest turned out to be the son of a Senegalese Foreign Legionnaire, who used chains for a logging operation and armed guards to protect his hardwood.

The Vietnamese treat the American recovery teams not as mere visitors but, as Lieutenant Colonel Smith said, with the kind of deference that one would accord "a strange monk from a far distant land." He said, "They know we have something to do with bringing back the dead."

As we returned on foot from the excavation site at Dong Ma on the second afternoon, Zib Martinson Goodman described a discovery of what were believed to be American remains that had been found covered in parachute fabric before burial. "The parachute had been beautifully wrapped," she said, and stopped on the trail, by way of emphasis. "The body had been *reverently* wrapped."

JPAC's work in any host nation is conducted under precisely determined conditions, but those imposed by the Vietnamese government are especially exacting. Not only must Vietnamese officials accompany all investigation and recovery missions but JPAC personnel must wear civilian clothes at all times; Vietnamese pilots fly the Russian MI-17 helicopters into and out of the usually difficult-to-reach sites. ("I look at it this way," a senior JPAC official told me. "I could fly with a twenty-five-year-old American hot shot or with a seasoned Vietnamese pilot who's survived twenty-five years of flying.") Each mission and site must be negotiated, and a cost for an agreed-upon field session, generally lasting thirty-five to forty days, is paid to the Vietnamese government, which pays the local workers.

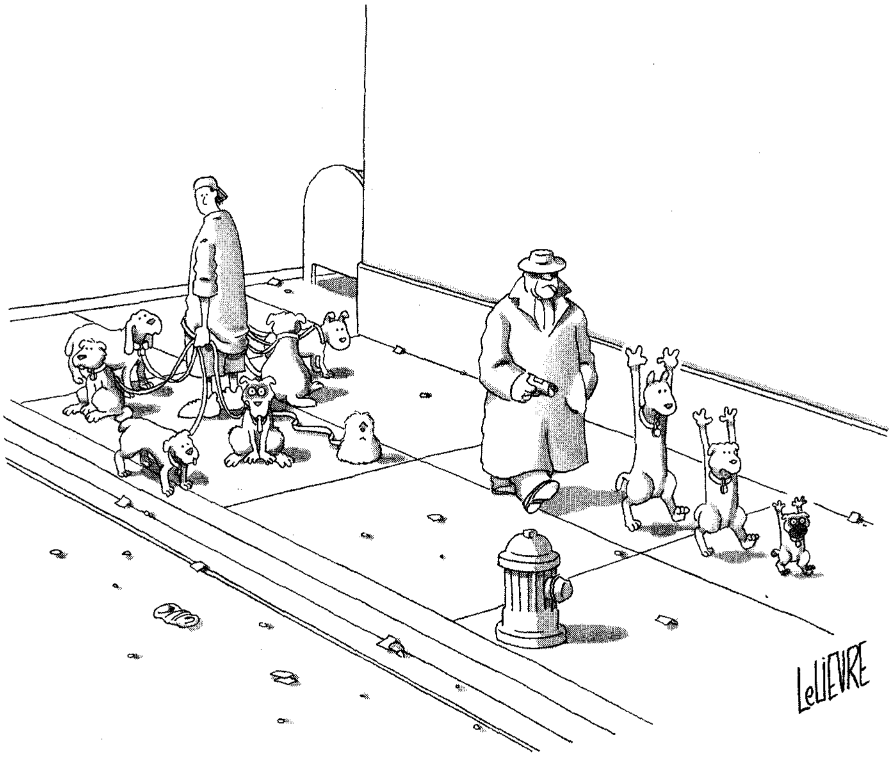
When human remains are found, they are analyzed by both Vietnamese and American specialists. If both parties agree that the remains are "Western," they are sent to the Central Identification Laboratory at Hickam. There, the remains are examined again and, if possible, identified. Once identification has been made, family members are notified. The remains are then returned to them to receive a military funeral.

"My government will do whatever it takes to find out what happened to every fallen soldier and bring him home," Smith told me. But, he added, "The sites are getting harder and harder and harder. All the low-hanging fruit have gone." As a result, the measures taken for retrieval have become more extreme. An excavation of a pond in Vinh had required the building of a steel cofferdam to keep the foundations of an adjacent apartment block from collapsing. Jungle rivers had been diverted, and the entire fluvial contents run through a sieve. Perhaps the most elaborate mission had been the exhumation of an airplane from a swamp in the Mekong Delta, a site first identified by a local shrimp farmer who had reported "a place where nothing grows," and where traces of oil bubbled up from the silt. Retrieval of the plane had taken three weeks of preparation, followed by seventy-one days of hard labor to pump the contents of the swamp from one specially dug twelve-metre-deep catchment to another and then back again, aided by a bucket line of two hundred and thirty local workers; the pilot's class ring was the only relic discovered. In general, owing to the high acidity of the soil in Southeast Asia, the survival of substantial remains is rare.

By the end of Recovery Team 4's work on Dong Ma Mountain, no further remains had been found. A conclusive identification of the tooth recovered two months earlier would be made at the Central Identification Laboratory. The case was now closed. After approximately forty-five hundred hours of excavation, at an incalculable cost, the sole human remains recovered from the ambush of 1968 was a single tooth.

"Maybe it's not so noble," one JPAC member suggested mischievously. "Maybe it's like the guy who drives his fat S.U.V., or the Texan who owns his big Magnum—it's because we can."

White clouds were closing in as we approached a remote site three miles from the Laos border, on the western slopes of the A Shau Valley. Flying just below the cloud ceiling, we passed over forested waves of highlands before landing in a rough clearing, where whole



trees lay toppled as if they had been impatiently pushed aside. Stepping out of the helicopter, I was greeted by Captain Grover Harms, Jr., the senior officer of Recovery Team 5, and a graduate of West Point. A slim man of middle height in his early thirties, Harms had a quick smile and the bright, dark eyes of a small and friendly animal.

Up a forest trail, Team 5's base camp was a sprawling complex of bamboo structures and awnings. The scope and sophistication of the facilities reflected the fact that this circumscribed arena would be home to twelve hardworking people for twenty-three days. All food, fuel, water, bedding, clothing, personal effects, and excavation equipment had been flown in; camp amenities included a generator, a DVD player, and, most impressively, an inflatable shower, with water pumped out of a nearby stream and heated. There had been heavy rains in the early days of the mission, flooding possessions and miring the camp in mud. The damp, insinuating cloud that pressed around the mountains often lingered here; dry, clean clothes, I was later told, were a luxury.

A U-shaped catwalk, constructed well above the muddy ground and sheltered by bamboo-and-plastic roofing, formed the team's living and eating quarters, somewhat resembling a traditional longhouse. Set along its plywood-and-bamboo floor were a series of pup tents, which afforded each team member minimal privacy. A sign had been carefully printed and hung on a bamboo rafter:

> Why suffer'st thou thy sons, unburied yet,
> To hover on the dreadful shore of Styx?
> Make way to lay them by their brethren.
> There greet in silence, as the dead are wont,
> And sleep in peace, slain in your country's wars!
> —"Titus Andronicus," Act I, Scene 1.

An undulating slope of slick mud, made tractable by bamboo steps and a railing, wound from the camp through a tunnel of greenery and bamboo, and ended on a muddy hill. A knot of Americans were digging near the base, the claggy earth carried up the hill by a bucket line of Vietnamese men and women, some seventy workers in all. On the summit, workers sifted the dirt through screens, and, as at the first site, an American inspected each pannier for remains. A significant portion of the hill had been scraped bare during a previous excavation and was, in the parlance of the profession, "sterile." From out of the disturbed earth and roots and hacked vegetation, three poisonous snakes had been found on this one day.

Working some distance from the screen line, approaching the hill's downslope, was the anthropologist August Goodman, a tall man of thirty with pale skin and a black beard and features one might see on marble busts of Roman emperors: his actual name, it turned out, was Augustus. Goodman, who is married to Zib Martinson Goodman, was responsible for the sign back at the camp.

He was from Mississippi, and before joining JPAC he had worked for a cultural-resource-management firm, doing field work, above the Brooks Range, in Alaska, where he had dealt with old Bering Sea culture, dating back some two thousand years, and where he had been living, as he put it, "in a little bitty hut" in temperatures as low as minus forty degrees. Trained as a forensic anthropologist, he had written his thesis on using bone histology to differentiate between Asians and Caucasians. Practical application, as opposed to teaching, had appealed to him from the beginning.

The object of the search on this nameless hill was the pilot of a UH-IC, or Huey, gunship that had been shot down by heavy-calibre machine-gun fire while engaged in an extraction mission in May, 1967. In the words of JPAC's report of "Circumstances of Loss," on being hit "the engine quit, then the helo received another burst of fire; the crew lost control, the helo crashed and rolled into a small ravine. Later the downed helicopter exploded."

Reports from other helicopters on the mission indicated that all four crew members had escaped and scattered into the forest. Over the next few days, searches were conducted by air and on land, and eventually three of the men were rescued. On two occasions, within twenty-four hours of the crash, rescue aircraft had spotted flashlight signals. The pilot, however, was never found. The case had been the object of five JPAC investigations, and one previous recovery effort, dating back to 1991.

Local witnesses reported having seen the body lying on this hill. According to one witness, the body had been face down; according to another, it had been face up.

"The challenge is to funnel the witnesses' reports, the material evidence, and the geotopography," Goodman said. It was a difficult site. The hill's precipitous slopes, which ranged from thirty-five degrees to as much as sixty degrees, and the heavy rains of the region had undoubtedly insured that, after so many years, any remains had been carried down and away to one side of the hill or the other; and although the body had been seen on the ground, there was no report that it had ever been buried. Team 5, and the earlier recovery effort, had found fragments of equipment, such as a spring from a radio and an airplane's data plate. Just this day, a bayonet was unearthed in the farthest grid, and an unspent .45-calibre bullet was found in a second pit, at the foot of the slope.

The clouds had been edging lower and lower, and were now a white fog drifting over the tops of the towering trees that ringed our small hill, swallowing the forest, as the forest had apparently swallowed the downed man. At that moment, the task at hand seemed preposterous and futile, belonging more to the realm of myth than to reality. A man had been leached into the earth, and the earth was now being turned inside out to find him.

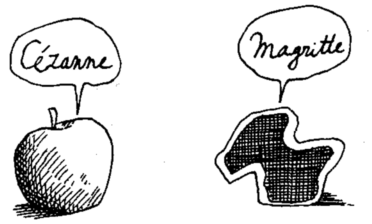
By dusk, rain had begun to fall. Back toward our camp, I was taken by Captain Grover Harms, the team's senior officer, to meet Colonel Khoi, the Vietnamese government official accompanying Team 5. Harms and Khoi had known each other since 1998, when Harms had first come to Vietnam. Khoi had his own substantial base camp, with family and colleagues often in attendance. Dressed in a singlet and shorts, he sat on a bamboo structure that formed a kind of bench, with the nonchalant authority of a genial James Bond villain. Harms enjoyed hanging out here, and, as he said, took advantage of the offer of many good meals. While Team 5 had airlifted in crates of tinned supplies, the Colonel had a small flock of live fowl sharing his quarters.

"If I could do this for the rest of my career, I would be happy," Harms said. This was the third mission he had led as a captain; on his first mission, in Laos, the remains of Governor Howard Dean's brother, Charles, had been found. For Harms, that had been a memorable experience.

"Even without their speaking, you can feel the appreciation," he said of the Dean family. "It removed any shadow of a doubt I might have had about whether the families find this meaningful."

Later, over dinner at the base camp, by the murky light powered by the generator, members of the team spoke of other missions. Staff Sergeant Tami Reeder had been on several in Papua New Guinea, for cases relating to the Second World War. Bodies from Second World War crash sites tend to be more intact than those of later conflicts, because the speed of aircraft was so much slower, and less destructive. In one case, according to Reeder, a body was found with eyeballs, flesh, and kidneys intact; "it was maybe embalmed with the fuel," he said. In Papua New Guinea, skeletal remains are found that have been left undisturbed throughout the decades; "nothing touched or looted," Reeder said. Taboos against touching the dead had kept the local populations at an awed distance. When JPAC investigators requested assistance, the local people performed ceremonies of propitiation and absolution before they approached.

Before turning in to my tent, I stood briefly outside in the night. Darkness and mist had reduced the forest to the black silhouettes of the foremost trees, standing in sentrylike silence over the camp. Many reports by men who had served in the A Shau Valley during the war recall its "spookiness." Strategically, this cleft in the otherwise impenetrable terrain was of great importance, serving as an N.V.A. supply route and, at the northern extremity, as a staging area. From time to time, between the monsoons, American forces attempted to make inroads, but without lasting success, and at the time of the ill-fated extraction mission the valley was entirely in North Vietnamese hands. According to conventional military wisdom, control of the heights commands control of a valley; but in A Shau the heights were cloaked in a camouflage of triple-canopy forest and, more often than not, shrouded with clouds so steeply banked that helicopters had to push up as high as ten thousand feet in search of holes in the coverage.



"An eerie, dark world," as Lieutenant Colonel Smith described it. "You can see the little scratched-out bare spots of old firebases on the hilltops, like pitiful little life rafts swallowed whole by a vast green sea."

The rain became heavy during the night, and a damp, foggy dawn broke with the crow of the Colonel's doomed rooster. It was soon apparent that there would be no flying today. Local workers arrived and left on foot every day from their homes in the valley, and our small group took the route they used to get out. With a guide leading, and having been warned never to grab hold of anything without looking at it first, we set forth. Steep and slippery at the outset, the path levelled off after forty-five minutes, and then merged into a small stream, which we followed, ankle deep, all the while under cover of leaves and vines: no one looking down from above could have seen us; nor, because we walked in the water, did we leave any mark of our passing.

When the forest trailed off, we arrived at the valley floor, vivid and green and watered by the A Sap River. Across the river, I wrung out my clothes and checked for leeches, then turned to look back the way we had come. A line of scrub trees was visible, and behind it only white fog: the mountains and forest had disappeared.

Both August Goodman and Zib Marinson Goodman had spoken of the same incident: one of the excavations had yielded a single fragment of bone, the head of a humerus, which was duly turned over to the dead man's family. His grown daughter, Zib said, "had gripped the bone as if electrified." Her father had been killed before she was born, and this was her first and only contact with him.

"That's what it's all about—bringing answers to the families," Lieutenant Colonel Smith said. "When I salute, I hold that salute just a little longer—for the families." The occasions he referred to were the repatriation ceremonies for recovered remains, the joint-services honor and color guards and salutes over the flag-draped transfer caskets, upon their arrival on American soil, in Hawaii.

On my return to Hanoi, I made a tour of the JPAC detachment quarters, where photographs of such ceremonies were displayed. The substantial aluminum caskets, designed to accommodate the body of the average American male, and borne by traditional pallbearers, belied their usually meagre contents—a single tooth, a fingernail-size fragment of bone.

"There's no problem with showing those, then?" asked a former British Army commando, who was also visiting. "What about the ban on photos of coffins coming from Iraq?"

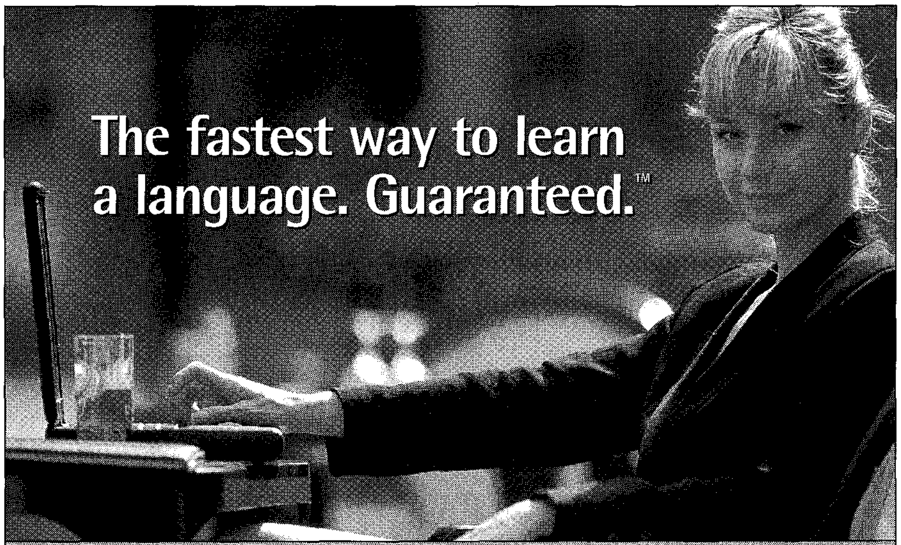
The Lieutenant Colonel explained: "In the case of Iraq, it's intruding on the family's grief. In this case—" he gestured toward the photos on the wall—"we're giving something back."

"The life of a man cannot come back," says Achilles.

> Of possessions
> cattle and fat sheep can be taken by force,
> and tripods can be acquired and tawny-
> headed horses;
> but the life of a man cannot come back,
> it cannot be taken by force, nor won
> back, once it gets past the teeth's
> barrier.

If repatriation is the compensation claimed by families, what is due the dead? The issue of "compensation" is one in which the Iliad has keen interest. How much bloodshed constitutes vengeance? How much for the ransom of a body? What is the value of a life?

For the Homeric hero, there was nothing to look forward to in the land of the dead, beyond the Styx; the only approximate compensation for death was *kleos*, a word usually translated as "glory," but the primary meaning of which is "rumor" or "report." "Glory," as such, is what is said about you after you have died. The *kleos* of Achilles is, of course, the Iliad; lesser heroes must be content with the little bullet-point histories that accompany their deaths. This, not the extravagant act of excavation, may be JPAC's most enduring offering to the dead: the resurrection of a soldier's *kleos*, his Loss Incidence File, his L.K.A.—Last Known Alive. ◆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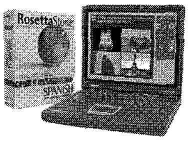

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ANNALS OF POLITICS

INSIDE DOPE

Mark Halperin and the transformation of the Washington establishment.

BY DAVID GRANN

"There is always some new tidbit," Mark Halperin said. "You just have to ferret it out." It was the first day of the Republican Convention, in New York, and although the sun had not yet risen, he had already laid out all he needed for his peculiar trade—three television monitors, a laptop, a BlackBerry, a cell phone, a pager—in a makeshift space on the fifth floor of Madison Square Garden. Outside the Washington establishment, Halperin is known, if at all, as a journalist (his official title is political director of ABC News), but within it he is considered the leading purveyor of inside dope. As the founder of The Note, a political news digest that appears on the ABC News Web site each weekday morning by eleven o'clock, he collects information the way bookies keep tabs on the latest odds, or photographers chase the fading light. He collects polling data, no matter what the time of year or the size of the sample. He collects any rise or fall—even the smallest blip—in the projected electoral count. He also collects dirt, such as the unsealed divorce records of Jack Ryan, a Senate candidate from Illinois, which detailed visits to an alleged "sex club," and which forced Ryan out of the race. He collects other things, too: arcane statistics from documents that government agencies churn out but few read; embargoed political books (The Note footnoted Kitty Kelley's gossipy portrait of the Bush family twenty-four hours before it was released, beneath the teaser "Here Kitty, Kitty"); wire reports; radio transcripts; pieces of legislation; the guest lists of Georgetown dinner parties; and other minutiae that are of little interest to the ordinary citizen but are essential to his calling ("2:00 P.M.: Sen. John Kerry and his family hold a barbeque at the Heinz Farm, Fox Chapel, Pa"). Mostly, though, Halperin collects leaks and scuttlebutt from the campaign consultants, strategists, pollsters, pundits, and journalists who make up the modern-day political establishment, or what Halperin calls "the Gang of 500."

"We try to channel what the chattering class is chattering about, and to capture the sensibility, ethos, and rituals of the Gang of 500, which still largely sets the political agenda for the country," Halperin explained during one of several recent conversations.

Mary Matalin, a campaign adviser to President Bush, described Halperin as "the insider's insider's insider" and the readership of The Note as a kind of "Skull and Bones for the political class." The Note is written in a runic argot that is often incomprehensible to the outsider. A typical edition includes comments like this one:

> So for the Rs, the formula is simple: Positive ads (to boost the POTUS favs back up) + negative ads (to define Kerry) + free media from the negative ads (to increase the bang for the buck and bracket Kerry's free media message, as with today's gas tax ad) + presidential and vice presidential speeches and trips to swing states (like today's economic message in Wisconsin by Mr. Bush) + a crafty congressional agenda (except for that pesky highway bill . . .) + a foreign-trips-Olympics-9/11-anniversary-debates strategy like you wouldn't believe = 270 electoral votes or more.

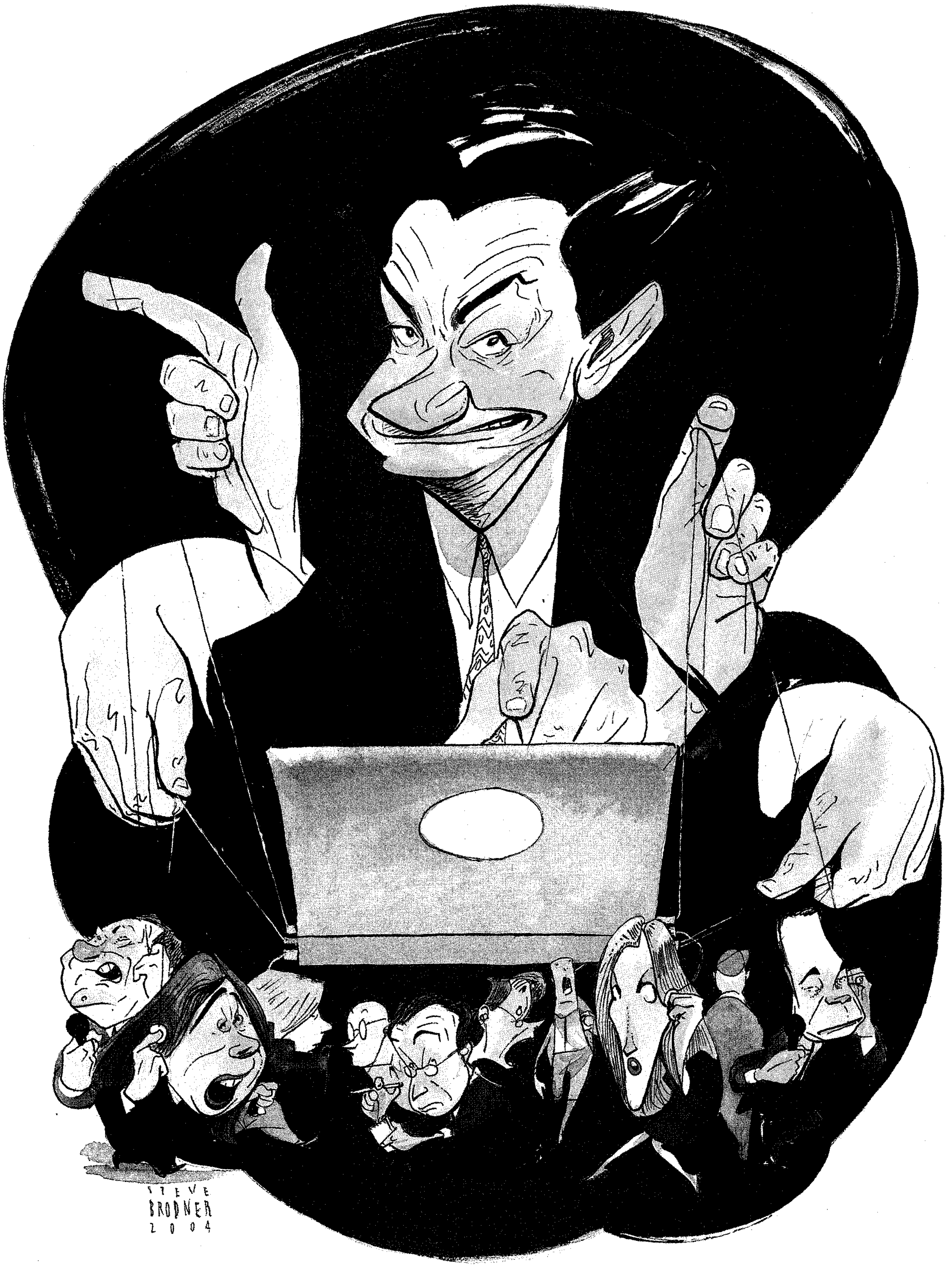
Karl Rove, Bush's chief strategist, is sometimes described as S.M.I.P. ("smartest man in politics"), and Kerry's former campaign manager Jim Jordan as S.S.M.I.P. ("second smartest man in politics"). Halperin's references can be so obscure that they baffle even members of the Gang of 500. Recently, after The Note joked that a cabal of left-wing journalists was holding meetings, "per usual," on the top floor of Lauriol Plaza, a Mexican restaurant in the Adams Morgan neighborhood of Washington, Rush Limbaugh announced on his radio show that he finally had proof of a liberal-media conspiracy. "Ladies and gentlemen . . . it's been admitted to, if I'm reading this correctly, by ABC's The Note," he said.

ABC does not release the number of hits that The Note receives each day, but it is believed to be about thirty thousand—less than one per cent of the readership of the *Times*. Yet its readers are, as Halperin puts it, "among the most sought-after eyeballs in the country." And the Note's very knowingness about those in the know has made it, since its creation, in January, 2002, the most influential tip sheet in Washington. "The President has the P.D.B., the Presidential Daily Briefing, where the C.I.A. takes all its information and gives it to the President," Paul Begala, a former campaign adviser to Bill Clinton and a co-host of CNN's "Crossfire," told me. "For everyone else in Washington, Halperin and The Note are our version of the P.D.B." Bill and Hillary Clinton are said to read it, as do Bill Frist, the Senate Majority Leader, and Terry McAuliffe, the head of the Democratic National Committee; when Rove is on the road, he has a printout sent to him.

In each edition, The Note tries to offer a comprehensive repository of political news, with Web links to what it considers the "must reads" in major and minor newspapers, and summaries of ephemera from cable news, talk radio, and the blogosphere. Its original reporting is often based on leaks from unnamed sources. During the Democratic primary season, the Howard Dean campaign spent months futilely trying to find out who kept sending Halperin its internal memoranda.

Many of The Note's scoops are presented in riddle form. On August 19th, after The Note learned that the Kerry campaign was about to hire two former Clinton advisers, Joel Johnson and Joe Lockhart, it broke the news with the headline "Pick Up Hazy Joely and Killer Joe." Buried in that day's edition was another hint: "There are those who are Harbouring a willingness to Park themselves at 15th and Eye Streets." When I asked Halperin to decode these allusions,

STEVE BRODNER


STEVE
BRODNER
2004

Readers have tried to decode Halperin's political ideology, but The Note's principal allegiance is to the cult of the scoop.

he explained that Johnson worked at the Harbour Group, a consulting firm, and that Lockhart was an employee at another consulting firm, the Glover Park Group; Kerry's campaign headquarters is at the corner of Fifteenth and I Streets. Halperin explained further that Lockhart was a Bruce Springsteen fan, and that the headline was a play on the song "Spirit in the Night," which includes the lyric "We'll pick up Hazy Davy and Killer Joe." (After the item appeared, another Web site for political devotees, wonkette.com, mockingly solved the puzzle with an entry entitled "Translating The Note.")

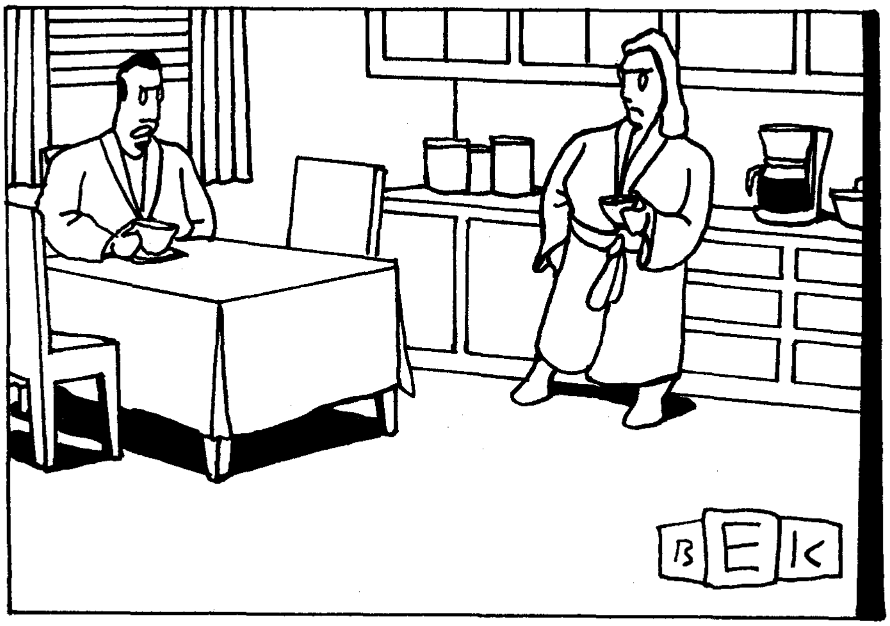
Weeks earlier, Halperin had offered clues to a more important mystery—Kerry's choice of running mate. Halperin and ABC News had assigned a reporter to tail each potential nominee around the clock, and The Note was the first to determine that Kerry had visited former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright's home late one night to meet with his choice. Initially, The Note suspected that it was Richard Gephardt who had somehow slipped, undetected, through the door. Then, the next day, under the headline "Georgetown Alley Cat," it published the sentence "Gift to our competitors: the key to the whole Veepstakes puzzle might just be found by clicking on this link." The link connected readers to a page from an Indonesian travel Web site, featuring the following text: "Distance between Washington, District of Columbia, United States, and Orlando, Florida, United States . . . 759 miles." For The Note's savviest readers, the message was clear: Senator John Edwards, who had been vacationing at Disney World, had made a clandestine trip to Washington to meet with Kerry at Albright's home, and was thus the nominee. As Halperin told me, "The Note can function on at least two levels—something for insiders and something for hyper-insiders."

It was so early at Madison Square Garden that the arena was all but empty. Given the amount of information that Halperin has to consume daily, he told me, he has had to synchronize his "biological rhythms with the news cycle, so that information is not lying out there unanalyzed for too long." He measures time not by conventional units—hours, minutes—but by news programs. "Twelve o'clock for a normal person might be 'Let's think about having lunch,' but for me it's 'Rush Limbaugh is on,' " he said. "Six-thirty is not dinnertime; it's time for Peter, Dan, and Tom."

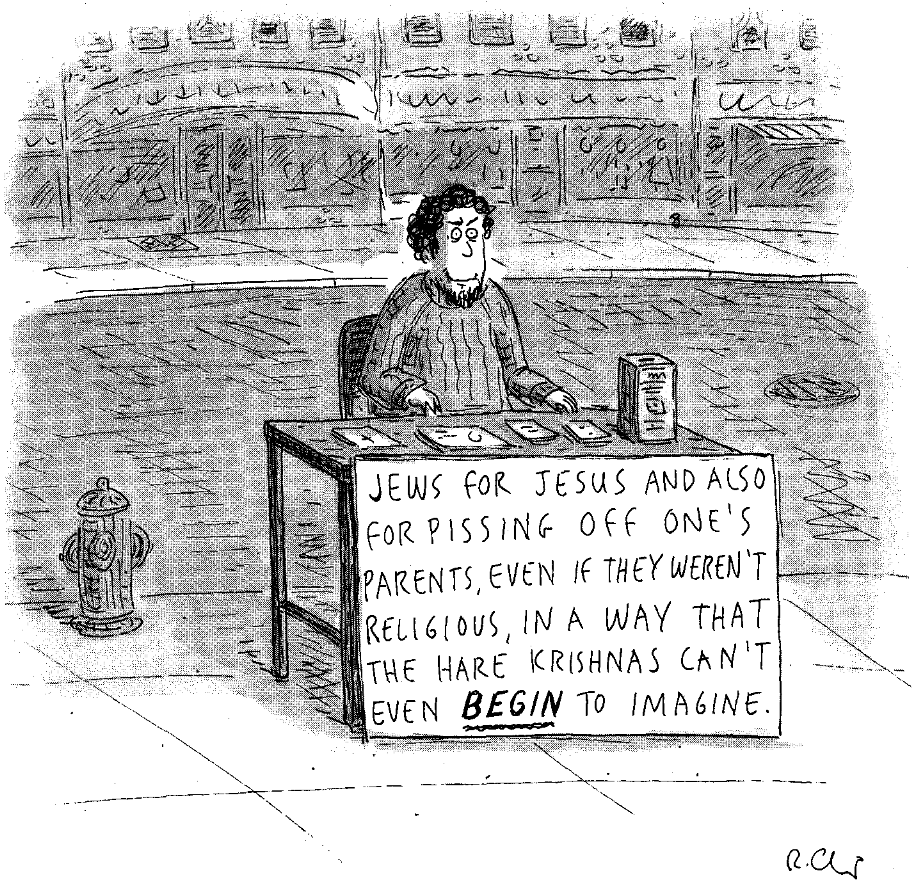
Technology has both liberated and tyrannized Halperin, at once allowing him to move from Washington to Manhattan—"my dirty little secret"—and inundating him with an ever-greater, faster barrage of data. In his New York office, amid piles of campaign memorabilia, he has mounted six television screens, each tuned to a different news channel, and he has learned to watch them all simultaneously. He can read and send e-mails on his BlackBerry, even as he does live television interviews (though he tries to wait until a cutaway). He carries newspapers rolled under his arm, the way an architect totes his drawings, so that during free moments—the six minutes it takes (he's timed it) to get from his apartment to the newsroom, say, or at 5 A.M. on the StairMaster, before the "Imus in the Morning" radio show—he can absorb new information. He also depends on his longtime girlfriend, Karen Avrich, who works as a researcher on nonfiction books, as "a fail-safe system" to catch details that he might miss. In addition, he has a small team of young reporters, who share the burden of producing The Note, and who are often, to their chagrin, mistaken for "the Googling monkeys," a term that Halperin jokingly invokes in his newsletter to explain the mystifying way in which The Note processes so much information. "I couldn't do this alone," Halperin said. "Ten papers, maybe twenty—but not fifty."

Halperin, who is thirty-nine, is invariably described by those who know him as a "political junkie" or a "political animal." Both terms rankle him. "People don't describe sports fans or historians as junkies or animals," he said. Yet, in order to avoid missing a single moment of the news cycle, he has forsaken much that he used to enjoy: sports pages, novels, naps, uninterrupted vacations, Broadway shows, leisurely walks, silence. Halperin admits that his singular fixation sometimes gives him a feeling of "psychological oppression." Dan Balz, the veteran Washington *Post* reporter, says, "Politics is his life, in a way that I certainly don't even come close to." During the 1992 campaign, he was on the phone so much that he damaged his vocal cords. The Democratic strategist Chris Lehane insists that, based on the evidence, "the man doesn't sleep."

Still, Halperin has tried to swear off caffeine, which he considers poison. "Many people believe you can't cover politics without caffeine," he said. "It's one of my little challenges." He will find himself, as he did during the Democratic Convention, starting to slip with a Diet Coke, then another. "I try to resist," he said. "But, as Election Day approaches and I'm putting myself at a competitive



"I married you. I didn't marry your vivid dreams."


JEWS FOR JESUS AND ALSO FOR PISSING OFF ONE'S PARENTS, EVEN IF THEY WEREN'T RELIGIOUS, IN A WAY THAT THE HARE KRISHNAS CAN'T EVEN **BEGIN** TO IMAGINE.

disadvantage, I begin to drink it again."

Lately, Halperin has been offering more on-air political commentary on ABC; he has cut his black hair like an anchorman, and lost thirty pounds by reducing his consumption of carbs. (He calls it "the Newt Gingrich diet.") These cosmetic changes aside, he cannot hide that he is of a different breed from many television reporters. His nose is both large and slightly crooked, like a boxer's; he tends to grow a five-o'clock shadow by two o'clock, and he sweats even when it's cold. An introvert, he sometimes has trouble when the conversation wanders from politics, as if he were caught in the elevator with a stranger. He compensates in such moments with wit. In fact, he has become an uncanny mimic of the politicians he covers; his impression of Al Gore is considered as sharp as any that have appeared on "Saturday Night Live."

Yet it is his understanding of politics that distinguishes him. Begala said, "Halperin is the best. No. 1, he lives, sleeps, eats, and breathes it. No. 2, he's smarter than the average bear. He can sense where a political story or line of argument is going, and he can remember details from a campaign that took place decades ago."

At 6 A.M., Halperin began sorting through hundreds of press releases that he had received via e-mail: "Rumsfeld Said U.S. Was Prepared for 'Catastrophic Success' "; "Remarks of Senator John Edwards"; "Press Schedule of Mrs. Bush."

"You have to be relentless and disciplined about your in-box," he said. "Just the press releases alone can swamp you." There was also a constant flow of "pool reports"—summaries from the rotating group of reporters who accompany the President of the United States (POTUS) or the First Lady (FLOTUS) to private events. He had one from the day before that said, "POTUS . . . escorted FLOTUS, wearing a gray pantsuit, out of a black S.U.V. and into the chapel," where "a boisterous toddler . . . made a brief run at the presidential pew." Later, one came in from Nantucket, headlined "Wind Is Favorable," and saying, "JK will test his brand spankin' new windsurfer sail this afternoon. . . . If he's brought close by the winds, we will toss a q [question]."

As Halperin deleted the more superfluous e-mails, he expressed a fear that, in his haste, he might have erased some divine piece of trivia that his readers might want to know. "We're on a tight deadline," he said. "There's no margin for error." As he watched the television monitors, spoke on the phone, wrote an e-mail, and ate a granola bar, he turned to a young reporter for The Note named Annie Chiappetta. Between them, they had already sifted through twenty papers, but, Halperin said, "we need more." A runner was quickly dispatched to a newsstand and, moments later, returned with two dozen more papers. Halperin took a New York *Post* and rolled it under the crook of his arm. He paused by a cooler filled with drinks and looked at the Diet Cokes. After a moment of hesitation, he removed a bottle of water. As he opened it, his eyes caught the television monitors in the corner of the room. It was 7 A.M.—time for the morning shows. His eyes darted back and forth, as if he were watching a foreign film with rapid subtitles. Suddenly, he said, "Can you turn that up?"

On NBC's "Today" show, Matt Lauer was interviewing President Bush, and had asked if the war on terrorism could be won. Bush replied, "I don't think you can win it." Halperin perked up. "Did you hear that?" he said. In an era of prepackaged rhetoric, there was nothing that delighted him as much as hearing a candidate saying something startling—something off message.

At the end of 2002, Halperin caught another, more devastating gaffe, and in the process established The Note as a new source of power in Washington. On December 5th—at the hundredth-birthday party for Strom Thurmond, the South Carolina senator who ran for President in 1948 as a staunch segregationist—Trent Lott, the Mississippi Republican, who was about to be sworn in as Senate Majority Leader, stood and delivered a now infamous statement: "I want to say this about my state. When Strom Thurmond ran for President we voted for him. We're proud of it. And if the rest of the country had followed our lead we wouldn't have had all these problems over all these years, either." Though many members of the press listened to the speech, only ABC television offered a report on the remarks—a brief synop-

"Hey, no problem—I'll take the next one."

• •

sis that aired at four-thirty in the morning. No other television outlet or newspaper mentioned them, and they seemed poised to vanish from the public record.

Then, on December 6th, Halperin highlighted the remarks in The Note. Within hours, Talking Points Memo, a liberal blog written by Joshua Micah Marshall, and Tapped, a blog put out by the left-leaning magazine *The American Prospect*, picked up the story. Crediting The Note, Tapped wrote, "What about the *national* media? . . . Trent Lott, soon to be the Senate's majority leader, is caught on tape reminiscing fondly about a segregationist presidential campaign, and we hear nothing (although, since The Note is read widely, that might change)." Indeed, it soon did. That night, James Carville, the Democratic strategist, criticized Lott's comments on "Crossfire." Tom Edsall, a Washington *Post* reporter, also spotted Lott's remarks in The Note. "I saw it in cold print, and it really stood out," he said. "That's when I got the sense that this deserved significant coverage." Meanwhile, more and more bloggers began to quote Lott's statement, while decrying the "old," print-based media for its silence. The Drudge Report, which had helped establish the Internet as a new form of political grapevine during the Monica Lewinsky affair, also started to promote the story. As the scandal spread to all the major newspapers and cable channels, The Note collected items from these other outlets, which it posted on its site, thereby spreading the story further. On December 13th, under the headline "Never Like(d) Him: Lott Has a Gang of 200 Problem," The Note crystallized how quickly sentiment in the political and media establishment had shifted:

> First, our extrapolated survey of the Gang of 200—Al and Judy, Ben and Sally, and the rest of the Chattering Class elite (yes, even the media and political elite have an elite) who will be gathering at holiday festivities over the next several days—suggests that 90 percent of them think he will be forced out as leader, and 59 percent of them seem to think he should be.

Two weeks after The Note posted its story, Lott relinquished his leadership post. Halperin's item was acknowledged as having incited what the New York *Post* called "The Internet's First Scalp." Most political strategists and reporters told me that that is the real power of The Note: a single item on its site can metastasize until it is picked up by more traditional media. Mickey Kaus, the author of Kausfiles, one of the first political blogs, once asked rhetorically, "If a tree falls in the forest, and The Note doesn't cover it . . . does it make a sound?"

Since its role in the Lott scandal confirmed its influence, The Note has become a pivotal instrument in campaigns. Strategists not only deluge its reporters with faxes and e-mails; they also leak to it, hoping that their information will radiate out into the rest of the media. Political operatives are constantly trying to plant items with Halperin. Steve McMahon, a longtime Democratic media consultant who worked for Howard Dean during the primaries, told me, "If you want to drop something, dropping it in The Note can be as good as dropping it in the New York *Times.*" Moreover, unlike most newspapers, The Note does not require that its anonymous sources be at least partially described. As McMahon put it, "You can do it without leaving any fingerprints."

During the Republican Convention, Karen Hughes, Bush's longtime communications adviser, appeared on ABC with Peter Jennings and complained about how The Note increasingly sets the agenda for the rest of the political press corps. "I think the national media tends to run a little bit more in a pack," she said. "My experience in the White House was that your colleague Mark Halperin was able to dictate a lot of the coverage by what he wrote in The Note, because all the political reporters in the country read The Note and so they would cover or ask questions that you suggested in The Note."

Reporters and editors also seek, and even lobby, to be "noted" in The Note themselves, so that their stories will be picked up by other news outlets. And in Washington social circles being mentioned in The Note has become a status symbol—proof of one's membership in the Gang of 500. In her new novel, "Sammy's Hill," Kristin Gore, the daughter of the former Vice-President, signals that her main character is a true insider by having her scan The Note.

Shortly after 9 A.M. at the Garden, Halperin and his colleagues were almost ready to hit the Send button on that morning's edition. Chiappetta, referring to a top official in the Bush White House, said, "I'm still waiting to hear back."

Halperin checked with her about another item: "Can we get that in? Is that on or off the record?"

A few minutes later, they had finished compiling and editing their report. Peter Jennings appeared, his face tinted beige with makeup, and conferred with Halperin about what they had. Most of the items were the usual fare: newspaper citations, summaries from the talk shows, offhand references to minor political figures ("Note to Debbie Dingell"). Then, in the middle of the text, Halperin inserted a question, based on a series of leaks: "Will John Kerry's campaign use its week (mostly) out of the spotlight to make some staff changes?" He didn't answer it or source it; he didn't have to. Later, after he declared, "The Note is out," and confirmed that it was posted on the Web site, he said, "Let's see what happens."

Halperin was born into the Washington establishment, and learned firsthand the power of inside information. His father, Morton H. Halperin, who is now sixty-six years old, was a protégé of the "wise men" who dominated the capital in the aftermath of the Second World War. (Halperin's generation of policymakers was known as the Whiz Kids.) In 1967, when Halperin was twenty-nine, President Johnson appointed him Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense—then the youngest person ever to hold the job. He worked under men who embodied the Old Guard, such as Clark Clifford, Johnson's Secretary of Defense, and John McCloy, a top Presidential adviser. If the establishment of McCloy and Clifford contained political operatives, it wasn't defined by them; instead, it was ruled by a cluster of businessmen, lawyers, and foreign-policy experts who shaped American foreign policy during the Cold War and who, despite their enormous clout inside Washington, were relatively anonymous outside it. "These men did not adhere to a single ideology," Walter Isaacson and Evan Thomas wrote in the book "The Wise Men." "Ideological fervor was frowned upon; pragmatism, realpolitik, moderation, and consensus were prized."

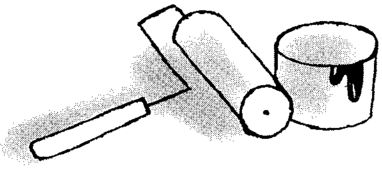
Like others in the Johnson White House, Morton Halperin was a registered Republican. "My interest was much more in policymaking than in electoral politics," he told me. "Most of the people I knew and dealt with didn't have a clue how parties chose a candidate." In 1969, when his son Mark was four, he joined the Nixon Administration, working for Henry Kissinger on the National Security Council.

Morton Halperin recalled that, in those days, the *Times* and the Washington *Post* were usually the only newspapers that the political class read. "You didn't have VCRs, so most people who worked in Washington didn't see the evening news, because you didn't get home in time," he said. "There wasn't this obsession with having television sets in your office."

Still, he said, each day Nixon was provided with "a summary," a collection of clippings from the major newspapers, which he studied compulsively. Nixon wanted not only to possess information but to know who else held it—and, more important, who was leaking it. As he pursued the war in Vietnam, and often deceived the public, he began to fear that the White House was full of leakers, and it was not long before he suspected Morton Halperin, who had turned against the war and knew nearly as many secrets about it as anyone else in the Administration. Among other things, Halperin had supervised the writing of the Pentagon Papers, the top-secret review of the history of U.S. involvement in Vietnam. Although there was no evidence that Halperin had leaked any national-security secrets, on May 9, 1969, after the *Times* reported that the Administration had launched secret bombing raids in Cambodia, Nixon and Kissinger ordered the wiretapping of his home telephone.

When someone picked up the phone at the Halperins' house, a buzzer sounded inside the Old Post Office Building, in Washington, where F.B.I. agents listened in with earphones. Mark Halperin recalled, "My two brothers and I were on the phone all the time, and my little brother had this girlfriend across the street that he used to talk to. Just imagine these poor F.B.I. agents having to sit there and monitor this three-year-old kid on the phone."

In 1970, after the U.S. invaded Cambodia, Morton Halperin severed his ties to the Nixon White House. Though he no longer had access to classified material, the wiretaps remained on his house for nearly a year longer. During that time, not a single conversation implicated him in any leaks. But in the summer of 1971, after Daniel Ellsberg, another former Nixon aide, leaked the Pentagon Papers to the *Times*, Nixon seemed to become even more suspicious of Halperin. Nixon suspected that secret files had been stashed at the Brookings Institution, a liberal-leaning think tank in Washington, where Halperin had gone to work. On June 30, 1971, according to White House tapes, Nixon told his chief of staff, H. R. Haldeman, "to break into the place, rifle the files and bring them out. . . . Go in around 8 or 9 o'clock."



A watchman at the Brookings Institution reported that soon afterward he turned away two men who tried to walk into the building with attaché cases, saying that they were going "to see Mr. Morton Halperin." Though no burglary was ever carried out, Nixon's order marked the beginning of the crimes that culminated in Watergate—a scandal that, with the help of two young reporters and a source called Deep Throat, enshrined the notion of inside dope in American politics. Morton Halperin later wrote several books that explored the anatomy of leaks in Washington and their power. (In "Top Secret," he wrote, "The harms to national security for which leaking is sometimes blamed have been vastly overstated.") And according to Mark his father taught him that the role of the media was a simple one: "to hold powerful interests accountable to the public interest."

By the time Mark joined ABC as an off-air producer, in 1988, his father's establishment, already fractured over Vietnam, was increasingly being crowded out by a new élite. Whereas that earlier establishment was defined largely by obscure professional policymakers, the new one was defined at least as much by famous professional politicos—pollsters and pundits and media consultants and campaign strategists. And, just as the father had reflected the values of the old establishment, the son embodied the new one.

In 1991, Halperin was assigned to cover a little-known Democratic candidate from Arkansas named William Jefferson Clinton. As he travelled with

Clinton's team from one city to another, Halperin was exposed for the first time to the high-tech craft of the modern campaign. After the nineteen-sixties, as the power of the old party machines eroded, candidates needed new ways to reach voters, and they turned to the medium that could reach them all: television. Nixon, using a team of admen, was one of the first to package himself "like so much toothpaste or detergent," as Joe McGinnis described this approach in "The Selling of the President." The emergence of sophisticated public-opinion research made politics even more of a science than an art, and candidates gradually surrounded themselves with a gallery of expert manipulators: pollsters, advertising executives, media consultants, campaign strategists, and direct-mail gurus. As George Stephanopoulos, one of the Clinton campaign's top strategists, wrote in his memoir, "All Too Human," "There were still amateurs who loved the game in 1991, but campaigns were now run by professionals." And these tacticians were becoming as renowned as the candidates—or, as Stephanopoulos put it, "I was also becoming a political celebrity."

MONOLOGUE OF A DOG ENSNARED IN HISTORY

There are dogs and dogs. I was among the chosen.
I had good papers and wolf's blood in my veins.
I lived upon the heights inhaling the odors of views:
meadows in sunlight, spruces after rain,
and clumps of earth beneath the snow.

I had a decent home and people on call.
I was fed, washed, groomed,
and taken for lovely strolls.
Respectfully, though, and *comme il faut.*
They all knew full well whose dog I was.

Any lousy mutt can have a master.
Take care, though—beware comparisons.
My master was a breed apart.
He had a splendid herd that trailed his every step
and fixed their eyes on him in fearful awe.

For me they always had smiles,
with envy poorly hidden.
Since only I had the right
to greet him with nimble leaps,
only I could say goodbye by worrying his trousers with my teeth.
Only I was permitted
to receive scratching and stroking
with my head laid in his lap.
Only I could feign sleep
while he bent over me to whisper something.

He raged at others often, loudly.
He snarled, barked,
raced from wall to wall.
I suspect he liked only me
and nobody else, ever.

I also had responsibilities: waiting, trusting.
Since he would turn up briefly and then vanish.

Halperin was introduced, he said, to this "new generation of Democratic-strategist stars." He also met the country's top political reporters, many of whom had become versions of what the sociologist David Riesman dubbed the "inside dopester"—someone who knows the "political score as he must know the score in other fields of entertainment, such as sports." Many of the political reporters, including Halperin, had read Theodore H. White's book "The Making of the President, 1960," which had revolutionized campaign coverage. In the past, the process had been a fairly staid affair: a Presidential candidate delivered a stump speech, and the press duly banged out a summary of his remarks on a typewriter. White's book, in contrast, presents the contest between Kennedy and Nixon as a thrilling, photo-finish horse race. White describes Kennedy watching the election returns in Hyannis Port: "The candidate posed himself in the corner of the room . . . too tense to sit . . . clutching back to back two paperback books." After that, as Timothy Crouse noted in "The Boys on the Bus," his book about the reporters following the 1972 Presidential campaign, "most editors were sending off their men with rabid pep talks about the importance of sniffing out inside dope, getting background into the story, finding out what makes the campaign tick." White himself later came to regret what he had unleashed, saying, "Who gives a fuck if the guy had milk and Total for breakfast?"

More and more, in the seventies and eighties, the press didn't just report on a campaign; journalists helped influence the outcome. "By reporting a man's political strengths, they made him a front runner; by mentioning his weaknesses and liabilities, they cut him down," Crouse wrote. Indeed, he concluded, "The press was no longer simply guessing who might run and who might win; the press was in some way determining these things."

As reporters grew more focussed on the mechanics of running a campaign, the campaigns themselves fed that curiosity. Chris Lehane, the Democratic strategist, told me, "Most people who cover the campaigns are now much more interested in the horse race. So, from a campaign perspective, you need to literally create good process stuff" to show the press. By 1992, the relationship between the press and the new political professionals had become increasingly symbiotic: the professionals required the

What kept him down there in the lowlands, I don't know.
I guessed, though, it must be pressing business,
at least as pressing
as my battle with the cats
and everything that moves for no good reason.

There's fate and fate. Mine changed abruptly.
One spring came
and he wasn't there.
All hell broke loose at home.
Suitcases, chests, trunks crammed into cars.
The wheels squealed tearing downhill
and fell silent round the bend.

On the terrace scraps and tatters flamed,
yellow shirts, armbands with black emblems,
and lots and lots of battered cartons
with banners tumbling out.

I was adrift in this whirlwind,
more amazed than peeved.
I felt unfriendly glances on my fur.
As if I were a dog without a master,
some pushy stray
chased downstairs with a broom.

Someone tore my silver-trimmed collar off,
someone kicked my bowl, empty for days.
Then someone else, driving away,
leaned out from the car
and shot me twice.

He couldn't even shoot straight,
since I died for a long time, in pain,
to the buzz of impertinent flies.
I, the dog of my master.

—*Wislawa Szymborska*

(*Translated, from the Polish, by Stanislaw Barańczak and Clare Cavanagh.*)

media to get out their candidate's message; the reporters needed the consultants in order to fill their notebooks with colorful details. Accordingly, the campaigns offered the press "exclusive" stories about the struggle over a campaign slogan, or how an as yet unreleased attack ad had been created. In turn, many in the press published stories in which the consultants served as heroes or villains, depending on their tactical prowess. This phenomenon culminated in the Clinton "war room," a daily gathering of strategists. Ostensibly set up in order to respond to Republican attacks, the meetings quickly became a story in themselves, another titillating drama that also offered proof of the campaign's strategic superiority. The campaign even opened up the process to documentary cameras; the resulting film, "The War Room," cemented the idea of the operative as celebrity. (The Los Angeles *Times*, in its review, called Carville "a natural actor," with "the starring role he thoroughly deserves.")

In one scene in the film, which underscores how intertwined reporters and operatives have become, Halperin can be seen conferring with Stephanopoulos moments after a Presidential debate; however, rather than Stephanopoulos briefing Halperin, Halperin appears to be briefing Stephanopoulos. "What I wanted, since I was covering the Clinton campaign, was its instant reaction to what had gone on, without waiting for the aides to emerge from the spin room," Halperin recalls. "And so what I arranged with George was if he'd agree to leave the greenroom early, during the closing statements of the debate, I'd be willing to tell him what he'd missed, so when he got there he could then spin."

Halperin, using a handheld camera, made his own documentary about the Clinton campaign, "Elvis and Us," which was screened at the National Press Club. Meanwhile, he unearthed the kind of salacious details that campaigns still tried to conceal. Halperin was the first reporter to ask Clinton directly about Gennifer Flowers. Weeks later, ABC obtained perhaps the most potent piece of inside dope of the campaign: a letter that Clinton had sent to a colonel, during the Vietnam War, saying, "Thank you . . . for saving me from the draft." Halperin handed a copy to Stephanopoulos and Begala on a runway in New Hampshire and said, "Nobody else has this. Read it right away. We're going to need a response." Begala recalls, "I still remember my eyes settling on that sentence—that's when my knees buckled." Halperin said, "It was a little bit heady and overwhelming at that point in my career to deal with something that high-stakes."

As Halperin was flourishing inside the new establishment, his father's career was foundering. After the election, Clinton nominated Morton Halperin to be an Assistant Secretary of Defense. Halperin later told National Public Radio that he hoped to use the position to "try to do things which really do affect people's lives, to try to reduce some of the amount of suffering." Many stalwarts of the old establishment backed him, including two former Secretaries of State, four former Secretaries of Defense, and two former C.I.A. chiefs.

Nevertheless, Halperin was quickly set upon by conservative partisans and their operatives, who tried to use his nomination to subvert Clinton and, in the process, destroy Halperin's character. They used leaks and innuendo to hint that the C.I.A. had "a secret dossier," which disclosed his "subversive activities." Though the C.I.A. insisted that no such dossier existed, unnamed sources claimed they had "heard" accusations that included the words "killer" and "traitor." "It's very hard for the truth to catch up with a lie," Halperin complained at the time.

Yet, for many reporters in Washington, it was simply another scandalous story. Al Kamen, who now writes the Washington *Post's* "In the Loop" column—which, as a chronicle of the doings of lobbyists and political consultants, is, in many ways, a prototype of The Note—wrote, with another reporter, a story about the smearing. Its lead encapsulates the inside dopester's world view: "It's high Washington drama." Morton Halperin eventually withdrew his name from consideration.

Mark Halperin, meanwhile, continued to rise at ABC. In 1997, he was named the news division's political director. One evening three years later, in a testament to his status, Vice-President Al Gore, who was then running for President, stopped by the Upper West Side apartment that Halperin shares with Avrich, near Central Park, trailed by the Secret Service and his campaign staff. "I led him upstairs and offered him a Heineken," Halperin recalled. "He asked me who I thought he was going to pick as a running mate, and I said, 'Gephardt.' He said, 'Why?' And then I showed him some of my political memorabilia and we drank our beers and chatted for a while."

By 2000, the strategists who had once advised a candidate solely during a campaign had moved into Congress and the White House. Pat Caddell, a strategist for Jimmy Carter, who regularly attended White House staff meetings, wrote a ten-thousand-word memo that argued, "In devising a strategy for the Administration, it is important to recognize we cannot successfully separate politics and government. . . . It is my thesis that governing with public approval requires a continuing political campaign." The advent of twenty-four-hour cable news channels and the Internet also required strategists to adapt to a constant news cycle. Stephanopoulos told me, "Everyone said that our campaign war room in 1991 was the fastest. Now it would be considered Paleolithic."

Toward the end of 2000, to help ABC reporters and producers stay abreast, Halperin and his staff in the political unit began to collect their own reporting, together with information from other publications, into a single internal document. This became the model for The Note, and, inevitably, it was soon leaked throughout Washington. "People were desperate to get hold of it," Lehane said.

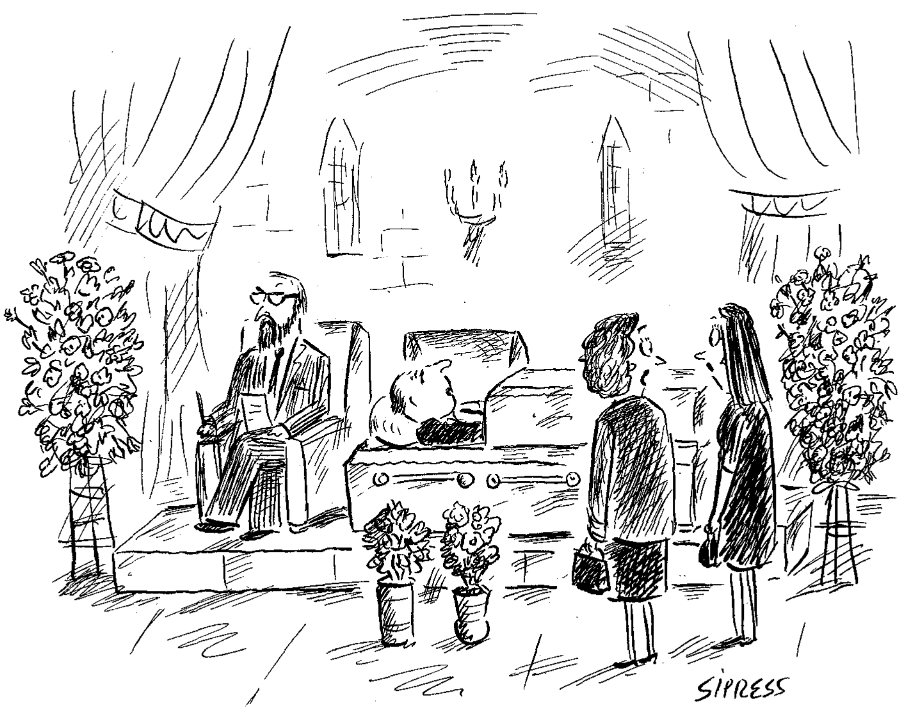
"It's like with the movies," Halperin told me. "People have developed an interest in the behind-the-scenes details, the box-office totals, who's the producer. With politics, people are interested in process and personality." Eventually, as readers began passing the document along to friends without permission, ABC decided to post it, free, on its Web site. It was the birth of "a monster," as the *Times* said, approvingly.

I'm homophobic!
I'm grossly incompetent!
I'll admit any damn thing in pants.
Shanahan

COLLEGE ADMISSIONS

On October 19, 2002, Halperin and his colleagues published the quintessential Note story. Headlined "On Your Marks," it hailed the beginning of the race for the White House, two years ahead of the election. Pointing out that "the clock is ticking," it declared, "We are focussing on what's really going to matter over the next few months: fundraising, travel, staffing, timetables for decision-making, and setting up the necessary bank accounts." It then ranked all the candidates by various categories. The categories included "money potential," "message/issues," "television campaigning skills," "buzz and momentum," "polling/name ID," "endorsements," and "staff/consultants." (At that early date, Richard Gephardt was in the over-all statistical lead by less than four tenths of a point.) The rankings, which became one of The Note's most popular features, represented the apotheosis of the new inside culture. Though there may be greater partisanship in Washington today, politics is treated by many in the political class as a battle less of ideology than of methodology, of pure technique. The media, likewise, no longer regard the selling of the President as an insult; instead, it is a compliment. There is virtue in stagecraft. ("Hats off to the White House communication team for handling the run-up and staging of this so well," The Note wrote of the Administration's decision to orchestrate an Oval Office meeting between President Bush and members of the 9/11 Commission.) Even dirty tactics are admired. In one instance, The Note praised the way a public-relations team had mounted a "six-day media plan" to burnish the image of Saudi Arabia, which was being criticized for its connections to terrorism. "The scheme you came up with is so clever, we think it should be used as a case study in political campaign management schools."

Readers of The Note have tried to



"He's still in therapy."

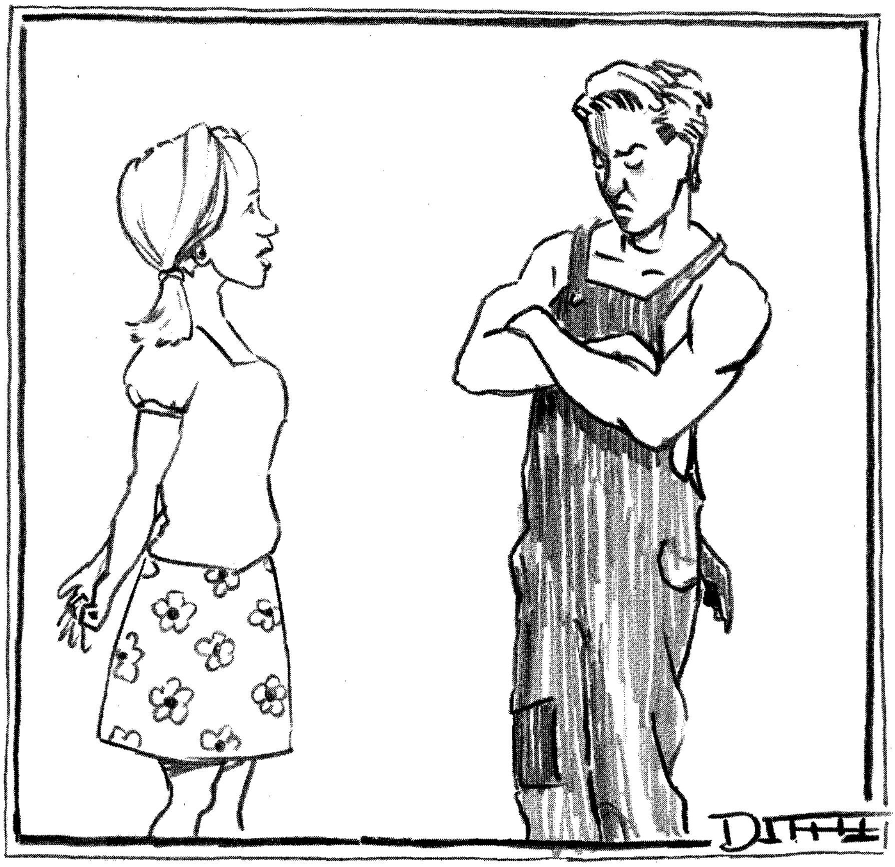
decode its political ideology. Halperin makes a point of not voting, which has contributed to the speculation. James Carville sometimes suspects that Halperin is a Republican, while the conservative Washington *Times* has claimed that he "leans liberal." Yet, as is the case with many publications today, The Note's principal allegiance is not to ideas but to the cult of the scoop and to the notion that success trumps all other values. And those who treat politics too seriously, who do not see the world with the cool detachment of the pros, are suspect. Earlier this year, The Note expressed bewilderment at those in "the goo-goo establishment"—including David Broder, a longtime political reporter at the Washington *Post*—who were naïve enough to try to fix the campaign-finance system. To do more than keep score is to be seen as a sucker. Indeed, The Note recently mocked the *Times*' editorial board for being "super excited about the substance of the VP debate."

One person who has worked on The Note told me, "The process of politics is seen as an end in itself." This approach was most vividly on display during the Democratic primaries, when The Note helped fuel the Howard Dean bubble because the Dean campaign seemed to embody the most innovative process—its focus on Internet outreach efforts suggested a twenty-first-century war room. In interviews, Halperin touted such triumphs as Dean's surprise "endorsement by Gore" and "his money advantage," much of which came through Internet fund-raising, and which made him all but the "prohibitive favorite." One experienced campaign reporter, explaining why The Note and so many other reporters were wrong about Dean, told me, "It was because the Dean campaign was so effective at feeding all the political reporters the bullshit process. It was process, process, process." And The Note doesn't hype just the campaigns that channel the process; it does the same with reporters who write about it. One magazine reporter told me, "I always try to get my stuff cited in The Note, but it's policy stuff, so they'll almost never include it."

More and more, The Note assumes the voice of the operative, with his insular language and morally neutral jargon. Along with talking about "segments" and "ad buys" and "traction," The Note will present its reporting in the style of draft memos from one campaign consultant to another. In her book "Ten Minutes from Normal," Karen Hughes, the Bush adviser, wrote, "Another trend that troubles me is that the media are increasingly becoming virtual participants—instead of observers—in the political process. This is especially evident in a daily political briefing called The Note." Hughes then criticized The Note's habit of offering advice to candidates, as it did in June, 2003, when it urged Democratic Presidential candidates in the Senate to filibuster against Bush's E.P.A. nominee. Sometimes the campaigns seem, if not to heed The Note's advice, then at least to adopt its words, as when a Kerry spokesman recently charged the Bush team of using "Googling monkeys" to dig up dirt.

As the media have taken on the role of the operative—conducting their own polls and focus groups, as well as welcoming former strategists into their ranks—they have become perhaps the most important faction in the Gang of 500. Accordingly, Halperin garlands reporters with their own Teddy White-like epithets: "the legendary Elizabeth Drew," the "unportly pepperpot Doug Jehl," the "poet/historian Adam Nagourney." The Note will describe articles as having "a Finemanian" world view, or offering a "Milbankian" style. And what the political press says is nearly always "seismic" or "boffo."

Halperin recognizes that it is corrosive for the press to treat a campaign as mere spectacle. On October 8th, he wrote a memorandum to colleagues at ABC that seemed to reflect his ambivalence about the tone of American political coverage. "Kerry distorts, takes out of context, and mistakes [sic] all the time, but these are not central to his effort to win," he wrote. In contrast, Halperin argued, the Bush campaign hopes "to win the election by destroying Senator Kerry at least partly through distortions." He noted, "We have a responsibility to hold both sides accountable to the public interest, but that doesn't mean we reflexively and artificially hold both sides 'equally' accountable when the facts don't warrant that." Though the memo was somewhat overstated and crudely expressed, it tried to do what The Note almost never does: make a moral distinction. Predictably, the memo was quickly leaked and posted on The Drudge Report, with the headline "ABC News Political Director Memo Sparks Controversy: Both Sides Not



"I hope we can still be cousins."

'Equally Accountable.' " Before long, it had generated its own mini-scandal, as the story spread through the blogosphere, where it was seen as confirmation of liberal media bias. On the conservative Web site Free Republic, a reader posted the message "Halperin's head should roll." Laura Ingraham recited from the memo on her radio show; the document was also quoted damningly by Fox News and the New York *Post*. Conservatives, meanwhile, tried to start a campaign to flood ABC's Web site with messages, thereby shutting it down. Rather than change today's media culture, the memo simply reinforced it.

Halperin refused to comment directly on the incident. However, he had told me, "In American political life, what *is* always creams what ought to be." I asked him how The Note would cover his father's era. He was silent, then said, "I couldn't even answer that." Another time, he said, "The dumbing-down, lowest-common-denominator dynamic that cable and Internet and tabloid culture have brought means that anything that is big and exclusive and legitimate is quickly turned into something trivial, tawdry, and dumbed-down. If we had the most consequential scoop of all times about wrongdoing in the Bush Administration, it would quickly turn into 'How's it polling? What are they saying about it on Drudge? What are they saying about it on "Hannity & Colmes"?' And it would be reduced to its cheapest, most ephemeral essence." He continued, "Just imagine Deep Throat during the current age. On cable TV every day there'd be guessing games on who it was. Bob Woodward would be staked out, and there would be profiles and journalistic stories about the journalism and was it ethical and how many sources did they have. You'd have a countdown clock on some cable channel of when Nixon's going to resign. You'd have Web sites with endless speculation about who Deep Throat was, and critiques of the language, and textual analysis of every Woodward and Bernstein story. All of that would serve to dilute and diminish not just the exclusivity of the scoop but the importance of the underlying story."

Yet perhaps the ultimate consequence of The Note's style of political coverage is not the trivialization of important stories but, rather, the inflation of trivial ones. With the media's ever-growing appetite for new information, there has been a gradual slackening of the definition of political inside dope. A little story—Killer Joe Lockhart's hiring, say, or Karl Rove's breakfast strategy sessions—is presented as a big story on The Note, an "absolute must read." (Halperin's own memo was hailed in the blogosphere as a "Rathergate-style bombshell.") But, as Leon Wieseltier, the literary editor of *The New Republic*, says of The Note, "It couldn't be more transient, like all gossip; but in politics, as in finance, gossip acquires the authority of superstition."

Later in the morning of that first day of the Republican Convention, after Halperin filed The Note, he roamed the floor along with other reporters. Because conventions no longer choose the parties' nominees, they have mainly become a vehicle for stagecraft, for branding. "So far, there isn't a whole lot of real news," Halperin said.

Still, there were hundreds of reporters looking for something. They had taken over entire wings and floors and corridors of Madison Square Garden. An estimated fifteen thousand media people were present—more than six times the number of delegates. Some reporters were from imitators of The Note. CNN had started The Morning Grind; CBS had The Washington Wrap; NBC had lured away one of Halperin's original co-authors, Elizabeth Wilner, to start First Read. The Note, in turn, had recently launched Noted Now, which posts instant bulletins day and night—"a twenty-four-hour Note," as Halperin called it.

There were so many insiders that, it seemed, there were no outsiders anymore. By noon, many reporters at the Convention had already read that morning's Note and come up to Halperin to talk about it. A reporter from the Washington *Post*, whose story had been cited, said, "Thanks for the mention."

"Always a pleasure," Halperin said.

The night before, Halperin and the

Post reporter had both attended a birthday party for John McCain, at which various fixtures of the media establishment had turned up: Tim Russert, Barbara Walters, Judy Woodruff, Chris Matthews. "I've never seen anything like it!" Halperin said. He recalled that he had been seated next to McCain's aunt. "I was sitting on one side, and Charlie Rose was sitting on the other. It was pretty wild."

As he moved through the arena, reporters and delegates kept asking him questions about what the real inside story was, what hidden clue he had slipped into that day's edition. Meanwhile, his single question about a potential shakeup in the Kerry campaign was starting to reverberate throughout the Convention. "That's catnip to the right," Halperin told me. "I take floating that kind of stuff really seriously." He went on, "I heard enough things from enough people in a way that I was comfortable floating that in the way we did, and we didn't say anything explicit. But I knew it would send off alarm bells."

Indeed, within twenty-four hours the rumor had been repeated on the Internet and on cable TV. While Kerry was trying to focus his message on what was happening in Iraq and on the economy, CNN's Wolf Blitzer seized upon the shakeup story. "Happening now, a call to shake up the Kerry campaign," Blitzer declared. "Why some Democrats are pushing for a change at the highest levels. Stand by for hard news on 'Wolf Blitzer Reports.' "

During the segment, he continued, "Joining us now, our senior political correspondent, Candy Crowley. You've been doing some serious reporting on this. How serious is this proposal to once again shake up the Kerry campaign?" Crowley said the campaign insisted that there would be "no major shakeups."

"All right," Blitzer said. "We'll see what has to be done, what will be done, if anything. Candy Crowley, thanks very much. We'll get more insight into this possible, possible shakeup inside the Kerry campaign later this hour."

Not long afterward, political reporters surrounded Terry McAuliffe, the D.N.C. chairman, at an event in New York. "It's not a shakeup," he said. "I don't know how that rumor got started." Forty-eight hours after The Note first planted it, the Boston *Globe* reported "a surge of strategizing and speculation about a shakeup," and the Boston *Herald* said that "rumors of a top-level staff shakeup," including the firing of the campaign manager, were "rattling Kerry's island interlude." At the same time, reporters and delegates continued to question Halperin about the story that he had unleashed. "I got Kerry people calling and saying, 'What's the deal—am I being fired?' " Halperin said.

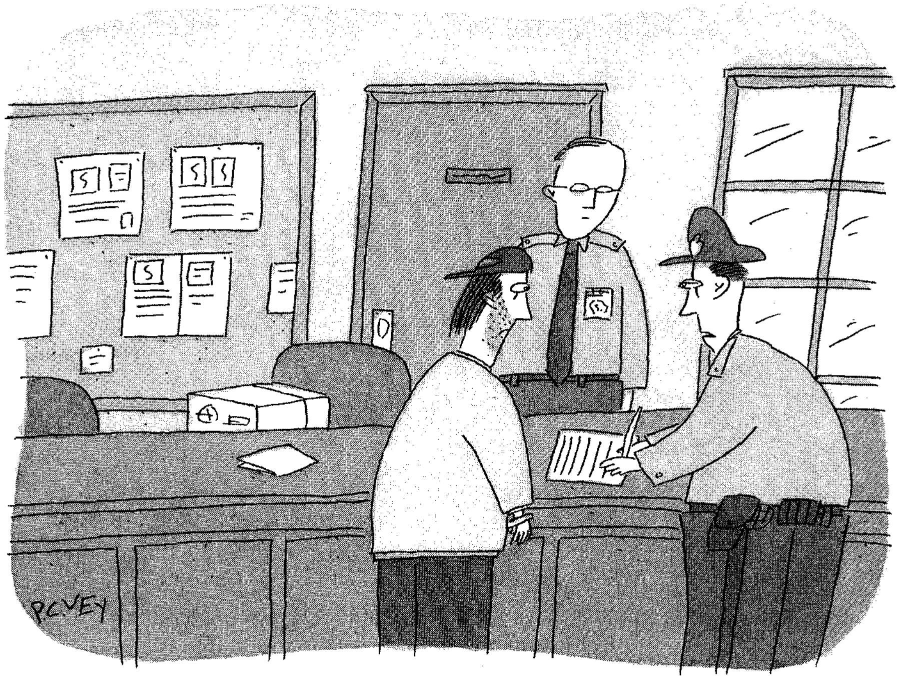
Finally, Kerry dispatched his top team of specialists—his campaign manager, his senior strategist, his pollster—to New York in order to signal to reporters that no campaign staffers were being fired. The only change was that some former Clinton strategists had been hired to build a more effective rapid-response team, which could quell rumors like the one about the shakeup.

Meanwhile, The Note offered snap judgments about the impact of the ongoing Convention in a "scorecard," arguing that "in our 24/7-cable-Internet-talk show politico-media culture, the only way to be anywhere close to first in offering an evaluation of ANYTHING in American politics is to rush beyond any sense of propriety or horse sense to analyze and dissect before an event is even over." The Note also assessed the impact of its speculation about changes in the Kerry campaign, without acknowledging its own role in propagating the rumor and in contributing to the need for such a war room. The Note wrote that the Kerry story had successfully nudged the campaign "off message enough so that the Democratic storyline for the week is 'campaign shakeup' rather than convention response."

In the long run, Halperin told me, the new rapid-response team would be essential in creating "a narrative" that Kerry was gaining momentum. "Kerry isn't the best Presidential candidate ever, and, in my professional judgment, he didn't have the horses around him to win this," he said. "Now he does."

Before the Convention ended, Halperin walked down to the floor and appeared briefly on ABC alongside Stephanopoulos, who is now one of the network's major political reporters. They chatted with their jackets off and their shirt sleeves rolled up, and rated some speeches, including the address of Rudolph Giuliani. "I give it an eight," Halperin said. He made several points about the dynamics of the election, but afterward he told me what he considered the most important one: "The worst thing that can happen to a candidate is to lose control of his public image."

Halperin glanced at his BlackBerry, checking his messages. Then his phone rang, and his voice rose over the din. "Are you sure?" he said. "Can we use that?" ♦



"*Sign here if you don't want to take part in a prisoner-abuse scandal.*"

PROFILES

A DRY SOUL IS BEST

Friendship, espionage, and the plays of Michael Frayn.

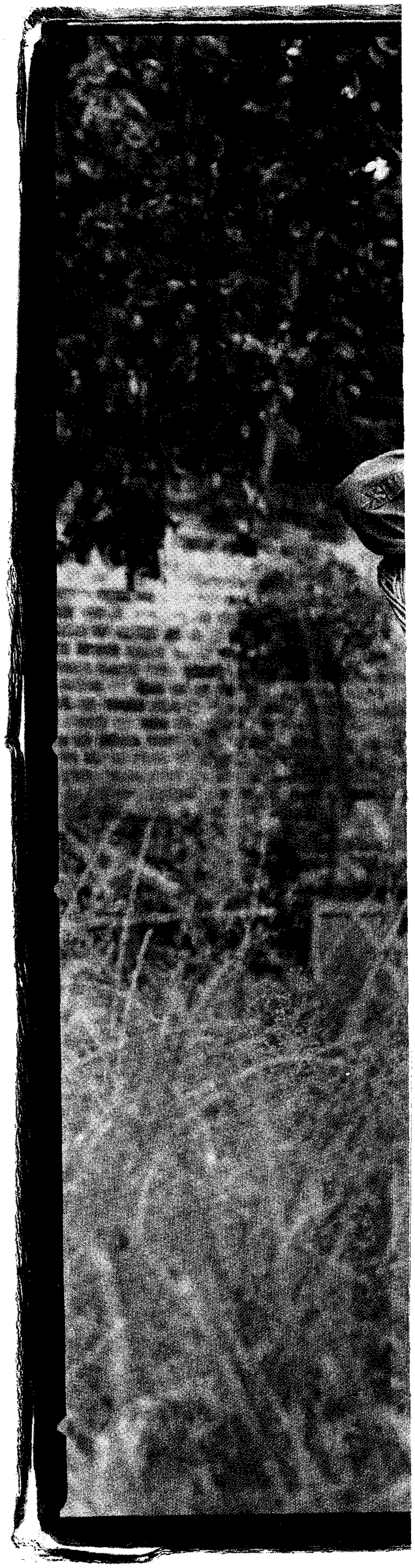
BY LARISSA MACFARQUHAR

Michael Frayn is a decent man. He is nice to everybody, easily pleased, self-effacing, and well liked. He is optimistic, cheerful, tidy, hardworking, discreet, modest, logically scrupulous, and parsimonious in matters of sentiment. He is moderate in most things (one would be tempted to say in all things were that not an immoderately moderate position). For instance, he enjoys food and wine but thinks that excessive gastronomic zeal is silly. "It's nicer to have good wine than nasty wine, it's nicer to have good food than nasty food, but everyone gets carried away by their enthusiasms," he says. He appreciates the flexible pragmatism of Tony Blair, of whom he may be the last remaining British admirer.

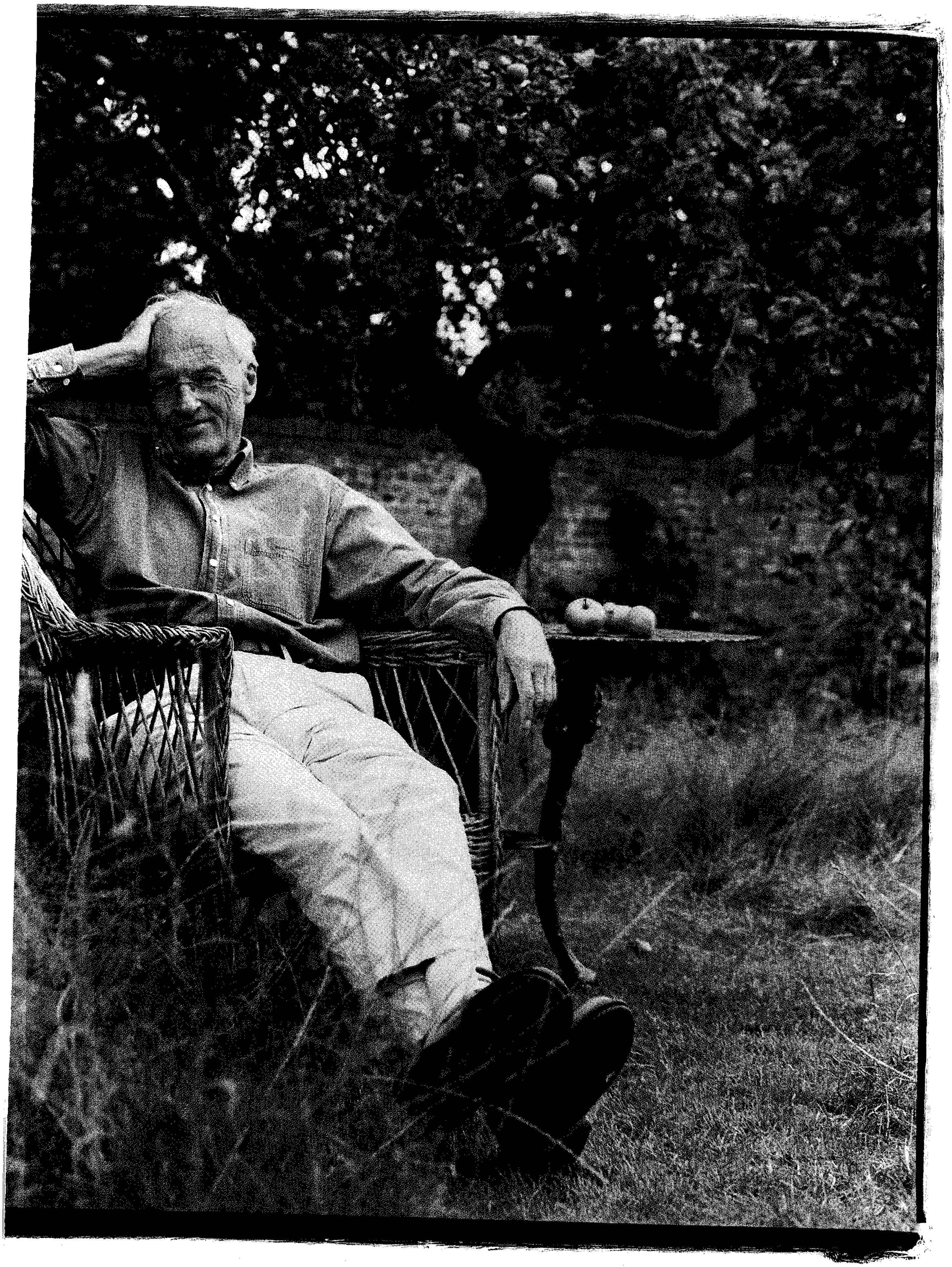
Frayn's is not a promising profile for a writer of fiction, but he has managed to embrace the impediment of sanity to write a series of plays and novels—more plays than novels, the former seeming to come more naturally to him—in which emotion and abstraction are planted in domestic soil. From Frayn's perspective, much fiction tends to look a little over-the-top. He believes, for instance, that mid-century existentialists such as Beckett, with their explorations of extreme blankness, have unintentionally produced a kind of feel-good literature. "You think, Well, I'm a bit bored sometimes, but at least I'm not as bored as *that*," he says. Once, on a visit to Japan, Frayn went to see a Kabuki play and found it an extremely foreign spectacle, very melodramatic and violent. At the end, he remarked to the friend who had taken him that it was a pity it was summer, since everyone in the audience seemed to have hay fever, judging by the constant sniffling. They didn't have hay fever, the friend explained. They were crying.

In one of his novels, "A Landing on the Sun" (1991), Frayn refers to "the little back garden that serves as a soul for the English." In most contexts, this would be an insult, but for Frayn the implication is more subtle. Yes, he is mocking the confines of Englishness, but at the same time there is an affection and a respect for that modesty of claim on the world's space; for the sense of sanity and limits; and for the inclination to self-denigrate that led him to formulate such a sentence in the first place. "He's a man of common sense," Neal Ascherson, the Scottish writer and an old friend of Frayn's, says. "He dislikes mysticism. He's non-romantic." In a book of philosophy that Frayn wrote, entitled "Constructions," he quotes a line from Heraclitus that a girl quoted to him when he was in university, and which he claims not to understand but has nonetheless remembered ever since as being singularly pleasing: "A dry soul is best."

Frayn has been to Russia many times, and has spent a considerable portion of his working life translating Chekhov; he finds the characters and sense of humor familiar, because they are so similar to those of the English middle class. Indeed, he feels that the English may understand them better than do the Russians, who misinterpret Chekhov's self-deprecating little ironies as solemn statements about life. But Frayn has never felt at home in Russia, and never wanted to. "It's always been too much for me," he says. "Russians are maximalists. I have a moderate view of life. Russian friendship has always been a very demanding concept, particularly in Soviet times. If you were admitted to someone's circle as a friend, you were expected to give up anything, really, as the Russians did for each other. If you had some money and your friend wanted to borrow it, you gave it to him. You had to be



Frayn in his garden. He says of his characters, "You've got to cajole them, bully them, bribe them, or something, to do what you want." Photograph by Dudley Reed.



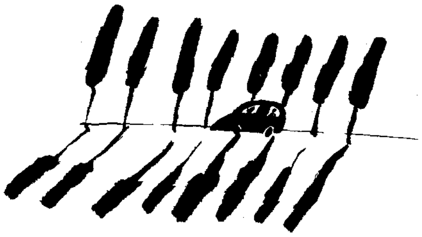
prepared to devote whole days to seeing people. Well, there are some English people who can cope with that, some who like it, but I can't say I ever have. I take a view of friendship as something that doesn't make those kinds of demands on you."

The ambivalence of friendship comes up often in Frayn's work. In "Benefactors," a tight, sharp play that opened in 1984 (one of the first of his works in which comedy takes second place to emotional plotting), two couples become excessively entangled in each other's lives and disaster follows. Frayn has written several excellent farces, among them his most brilliant work, "Noises Off," and one of the reasons they are so good is his ability to intensify to nearly unbearable levels the claustrophobia of the genre—the anxiety felt by both the characters and the audience at the inescapable proximity of other people, the way that characters are always bumping into each other in the wrong place and at the time when they need most desperately to flee. "Noises Off" is actually a farce within a farce, and the amazing structure of the thing, crafted with extraordinary care and precision, is apparent as the action descends further and further into chaos and hysteria. In the introduction to his second collection of plays, Frayn wrote, of farces, "You refuse to let yourself identify with the characters, or feel their feelings. You reject absolutely the idea that it could be you up there, so idiotically embarrassed, so transparently mendacious. . . . This is what gives farce its hysterical edge. Your refusal to recognise yourself has an element of violence in it. . . . Farce is a brutally difficult form. It is also of course a despised one. In laughing at it you have lost your moral dignity, and you don't like to admit it afterwards."

Frayn's newest play, "Democracy," follows the rise of Günter Guillaume, an East German Stasi spy who attained the post of aide to Willy Brandt while Brandt was Chancellor of West Germany, in the late sixties and early seventies. Frayn's Guillaume is genuinely devoted to Brandt, even though he betrays him every day. Some of Frayn's friends found it surprising that, when he had been so long preoccupied by the peculiar clichés of the English middle class, he began, late in life, to write about foreigners, but Frayn doesn't feel that Germans are really foreign. "I get to Germany and I feel a dreamlike sense of being at home," he says. "Germans keep their distance and use correct social forms in English ways." It is for this reason that Frayn's interest in twentieth-century German politics is not the common one. "The only part of German history that seems to arouse much interest in the British is the Nazi period," he wrote in a postscript to "Democracy." "That brutal holiday from the moral restraints under which West European societies normally labour possesses a kind of corrupt glamour for even the most timid and law-abiding. The half-century that has followed Germany's awakening from the sick dream is thought to be a time of dull respectability. . . . To me, I have to say, that material prosperity, that peacefulness, even that supposed dullness, represents an achievement at which I never cease to marvel or to be moved."

Frayn feels himself to be a "naturally religionless person." It's one of the things he is most grateful to his parents for, he says. "My father was terrific—he died of cancer, and he absolutely maintained his views. Chased the hospital chaplain out very sharply when he was close to the end. Of course, in the tiresome way of adolescents, when I got to be fourteen years old I suddenly decided I was religious and got myself baptized and confirmed, and for about a year I used to go to Communion every Sunday, and used to feel, particularly as I sipped the wine, a sense of holiness. The phase lasted a year or two and then I gave up."

Frayn's father left school at fourteen and sold asbestos roofing when asbestos was fairly new—the wonderful housing material that wouldn't catch fire. He used to bring hunks of it home for his children to play with. (Frayn's sister died of cancer recently, a result of that exposure.) "Was I lower-middle class?" Frayn wonders. "One grandfather was a shop assistant in a working-class district in London, the other grandfather was a salesman and failed at everything he did; my father was a salesman who'd done rather well and became a sales manager. Is that lower-middle class? Middle-middle class?"

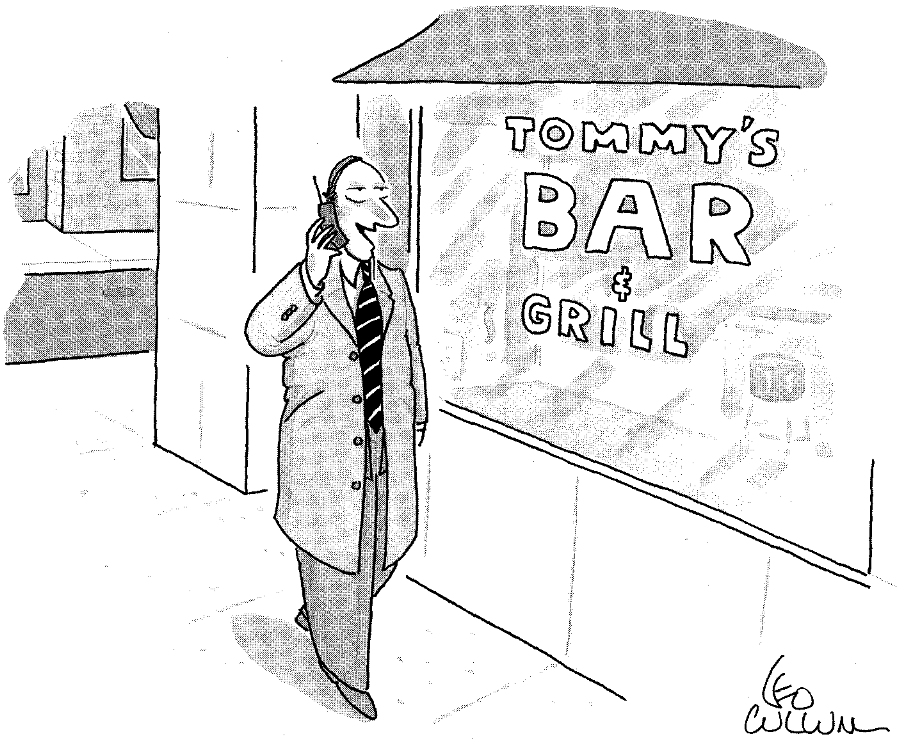


Frayn's father was partially deaf, and could hear only by means of an enormous contraption, an early hearing aid, that involved a complicated arrangement of wires and microphones and amplifiers and massive ancient batteries, which he disposed around his person, inside the pockets of and underneath his three-piece suit. When he undressed at the end of the day, it was, Frayn says, like watching an airman getting out of his flying kit. Would it be too much to suppose that this circumstance inclined his son to feel, more than most, the hit-or-miss uncertainty, the artificiality, the baffling complexity of conversation? Frayn's mother was a promising violinist when she was young, but then her father went broke, and she had to find work as a shop assistant. She died suddenly, when Frayn was twelve—she had a heart attack while walking across a room.

Frayn's family lived in Ewell, a London suburb like the one inhabited by the boys in his novel "Spies." He was extremely competitive as a boy—he would play tennis until he literally couldn't stand up and had to crawl from the lawn on his hands and knees. During the war, when he was nine or ten (he was born in 1933), his father would sometimes wake him up in the middle of the night to watch bombing raids on central London, because they were such a wonderful sight—the bombs, the searchlights, the flashes of anti-aircraft fire, the flares dropped by the German bombers to light up their targets. They seemed to him like fairy palaces, all colored lights in the sky. It didn't occur to him to be afraid: his parents never spoke to him about the war, so he had only a vague idea of what was going on. Later, the Germans started firing V-1s, doodlebugs, which were aimed at central London but sometimes fell short, onto the suburbs. The first night of the campaign, before anyone knew what they were, Frayn heard an incredible noise—

a bomb passed low over the roof of his house and fell on the hillside nearby, destroying a house and killing everyone in it. The Frayns' house, too, was badly damaged—the roof blew off and the windows blew in—but he found it all tremendously exciting. The delight of living in a house with no roof and no windows!

Shortly after his religious phase, Frayn, with Piagetian inexorability, moved into his Communist phase. He and a friend from school established an unofficial Communist cell, consisting of the two of them. He took up Russian a few years later, when, for his national service, he applied to the course that trained Russian interpreters for British intelligence and was accepted. During university, at Cambridge, he and a few others decided that it would be interesting to go to Russia as exchange students and see what it was actually like. In the course of the visit, Frayn became friends with one man in particular, and this man revealed to him that everything about his visit had been meticulously orchestrated—casual encounters in the canteen, seemingly random meetings while walking down a corridor. Frayn by that time was sufficiently disillusioned with Communism so that he had not been expecting to find paradise in Moscow, but he was nonetheless amazed by the extent of the state's control and attention to detail. In the end, neither religion nor Communism stuck to Frayn for very long, and since his teens he has not been tempted by extremity.



"Not much. Just enjoying my post-lunch bounce."

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Frayn's degree from Cambridge is in Moral Sciences, the university's old name for philosophy, but he didn't study the kind of philosophy that has moral aspirations. "I'm all in favor of people being told how to behave better," he says, "though it's not the sort of philosophy that personally interests me." He was drawn to traditional British empirical philosophy, which seeks not to change the world but to make logical sense of it—or, as he put it in his novel "A Landing on the Sun," "seeks merely to study and perhaps oil the conceptual machinery and then to put it back more or less as it was." Indeed, he tends to find the academic pursuit of ethical questions rather comical. In his first novel, "The Tin Men" (1965), he describes the experiments of a computer researcher named Macintosh, who has decided that the purest ethical situation is one in which two people are aboard a raft that will support only one of them; he is trying to perfect a robot named Samaritan, which, when placed in that situation, will do the right thing. His first prototype, Samaritan I, eagerly throws itself off the raft, but for the sake of any object of a certain weight, including lima beans and seaweed. Feeling that this outcome is unsatisfactory, Macintosh develops Samaritan II, which is trained to sacrifice itself only for an organism at least as mentally advanced as itself. He tries it out on a raft with his assistant, Sinson:

> The raft hit the water with a sharp report. Sinson and Samaritan sat perfectly still. Gradually the raft settled in the water, until a thin tide began to wash over the top of it. At once Samaritan leaned forward and seized Sinson's head. In four neat movements it measured the size of his skull, then paused, computing. Then, with a decisive click, it rolled sideways off the raft and sank without hesitation to the bottom of the tank. . . .
>
> Samaritan II came back up to the gantry, winched by the crane. There was something about its visible dials and displays that struck Goldwasser.
>
> "Doesn't it look a bit sanctimonious to you?" he asked Macintosh.
>
> "Aye, it always does after it's gone over the side. It's a minor defect. We'll get it right in development."

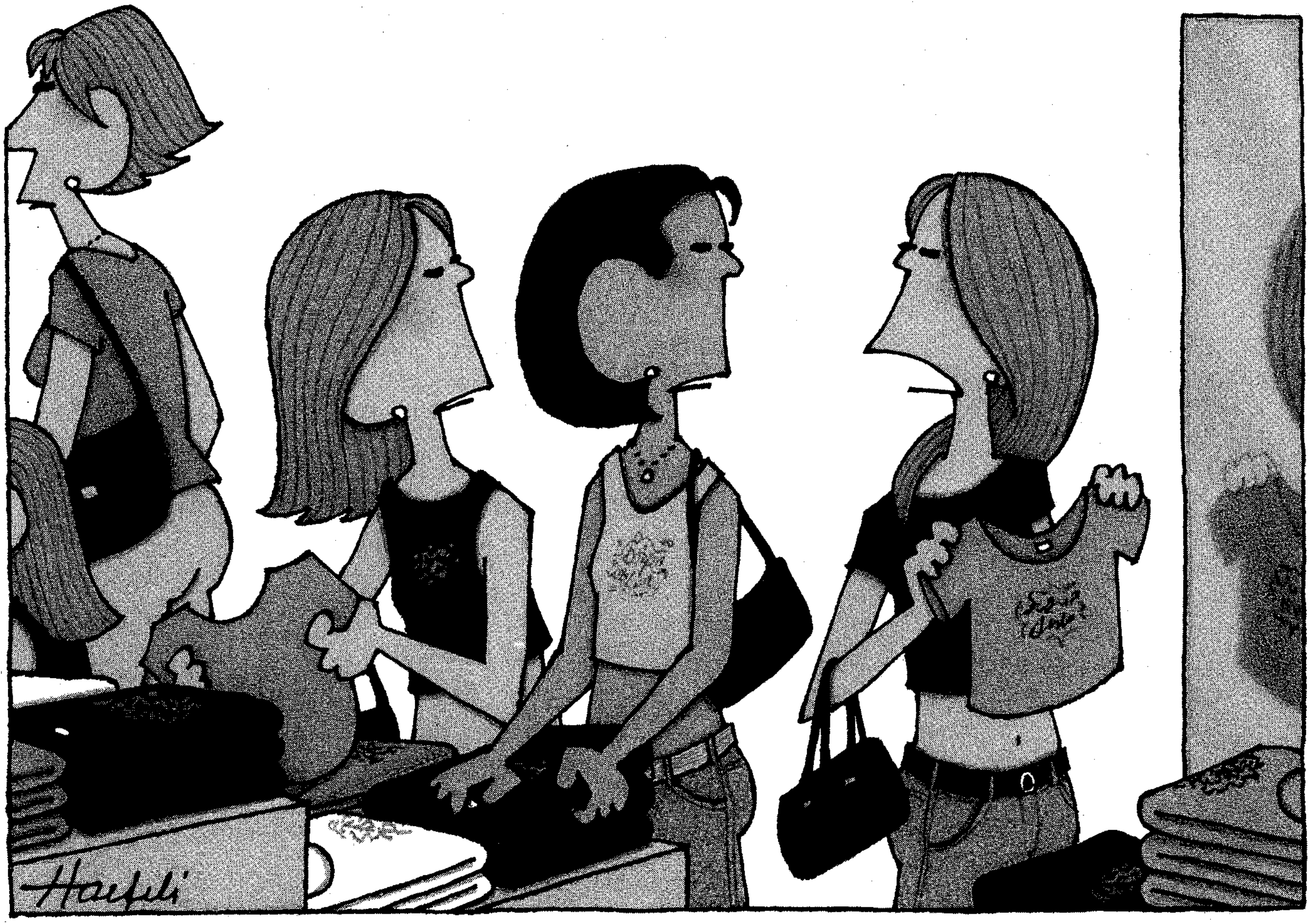
When Frayn arrived in Cambridge, in the mid-nineteen-fifties, the philosophy department was still dominated by Wittgenstein, who had taught there, although he had died a few years before. "Wittgenstein was an extraordinary philosopher and an absolutely horrible man," Frayn says. "He was one of those great charismatic bullies. Thank God I never knew him." Wittgenstein began his career believing, in the classical philosophical tradition, that most facts and situations in the world can be expressed precisely in language, because language takes its shape from the world and can accurately describe it. Later on, he reversed his position. He decided that language was a rough tool, built up in a makeshift, motley fashion over a long time, according to the purposes for which man needed it at that moment, like a city sprawling haphazardly into suburbs. The essence of language was not the construction of well-formed propositions but the accomplishment of ad-hoc communicative tasks, whatever was needed at the moment. The task of philosophy, accordingly, was not the formulation of true statements about the world but, rather, the analysis of the logic of statements that are in fact made. Until about ten years ago, Wittgenstein's influence was very visible in Frayn's work. Early on, he wrote an explicit Wittgenstein parody, "Fog-Like Sensations," and "Constructions" is a book of Wittgenstein-style aphorisms, but the influence ran more subtly through nearly everything he wrote. Where Wittgenstein examined conventional phrases for what they revealed about philosophical errors and ways of thinking, Frayn isolated and parodied them for comic effect.

After he left university, Frayn went to work as a junior reporter on the Manchester *Guardian*, and his early columns for the paper were so unrelievedly obsessed with the petrified forms of language, with parodying the conventions of conversational and journalistic English, that within their narrow satirical framework human communication was reduced to a kind of ritualized exchange of cards on which well-worn phrases were inscribed. One essay, for instance, proposed that speeches should be abolished in favor of the more up-to-date oral form, the interview—the implication being that the forms of public speaking have grown so thoroughly predictable that the task of disseminating them on appropriate occasions might as well be shared. For instance:

> "What exactly is the purpose of your visit?"
>
> "I come to bury Caesar," Antony would reply.
>
> "Not to praise him?"
>
> "Definitely not."

Frayn's columns were often couched in the form of stories about characters, but the characters were themselves so (intentionally) cartoonish that they functioned simply as clusters of phrases that frequently occurred together. There were Christopher and Lavinia Crumble, for instance, whose domestic ingenuities (amusing, whimsical little objects discovered, bargains driven, follies avoided) were a source, to them, of endless delight. "One of the principal benefits that matrimony confers on the young professional class," Frayn wrote, by way of introducing the Crumbles, "is that it enables us to give up that tiresome pretence of being interested in spiritual and cultural matters—forced on us by our education and our courtship rituals—and lets us settle down to a frank and total absorption in our financial and material circumstances." This sort of direct authorial statement, though, was rare in the columns: most were in the form of dialogue, or monologue, or narrative. Even the expository essays were written in tones so archly fictional, the voice kept so rigorously, delicately distant, that there was no overtly authorial voice at all.

Neal Ascherson had come up from Cambridge to join the Manchester *Guardian* the year before Frayn did, and remembers Frayn's arrival at the office: "He came up the stairs blinking and looking extremely thin and gawky and bespectacled and smiling all over his face." Frayn took a room in the boarding



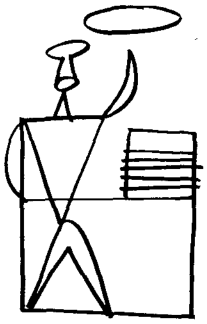
"My mother gives me a weekly allowance, but my father gives me soft money."

house that Ascherson lived in, but he was convinced that somewhere in Manchester there had to be a block of Gropius flats, a wonderful modern structure on a hill overlooking the city, and he decided that he must find that block of flats and live there. Ascherson hadn't heard of any such building, but he was willing to look for it, and so he and Frayn got into the habit of taking long, long walks around Manchester, stopping occasionally for refreshment in a pub, and talking, mostly about philosophy. Ascherson wasn't interested in Wittgenstein, so they debated more traditional questions such as mechanical determinism, and the other-minds problem.

After a few years, Frayn moved to London, married, and had three daughters in quick succession. He and his wife, Gillian, got together with a group of friends who also had young children, in order to build a group of houses on the cheap, in Blackheath, in southeast London. Soon afterward, Peter Nichols, whose play "A Day in the Death of Joe Egg" had just met with enormous success, moved in nearby with his family. The Nichols children and the Frayn children were the same age, and the families became friendly and went on holidays together. Nichols was nothing like Frayn—he was discontented, critical, and acidic, according to the director Michael Blakemore, and wrote about dark, hurtful, private subjects in a way that the discreet Frayn could never have done. "Joe Egg," for instance, is a black comedy about a couple trying to cope with a child who is born in a nearly vegetative state—a barely fictionalized version of the experience of Nichols and his wife. Nonetheless, Nichols and Frayn became close, and the friendship began to have an effect.

Up until then, Frayn—still smarting, he thinks now, from the failure of a revue he had written at Cambridge—had been against the theatre. He regularly mocked it in his column. But now he began to think about writing plays again. Two of his sketches appeared in a revue called "Share My Lettuce," which was brought to London by the producer Michael Codron, starring Maggie Smith and Kenneth Williams. The revue was a success, so Codron asked Frayn for more material, and Frayn supplied him with an evening's worth of short plays called, collectively, "The Two of Us," and his career as a playwright began.

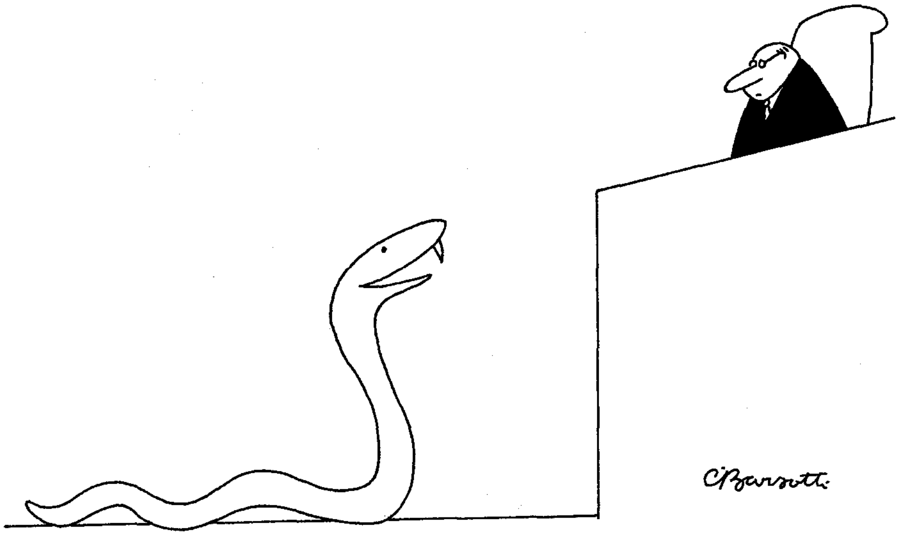
For several decades, Frayn, in both his novels and his plays, continued to be obsessed with the peculiarities and conventions of language, and this obsession was one of the most fruitful sources of his comedy. But in the past ten years he has become less invested in comedy, and less engaged by language as such. "I've got more interested in how people make sense of the world and each other, and less interested in how they present themselves to the world," he says. How people present themselves to the world—their vanities and hypocrisies and delusions of grandeur or subtlety—has always been a main focus of English comedy, and so it makes sense that language and comedy as preoccupations should rise and fall together. These days, Frayn has reverted to older philosophical questions, of the sort that Wittgenstein was partly responsible for persuading philosophers of Frayn's generation to abandon: What is a good life? What is forgivable? What is happiness?



These questions pressed themselves upon Frayn with unusual urgency in the late nineteen-seventies, when he discovered, to his embarrassment and grief, that his life was unravelling. It wasn't like him, he wasn't that kind of person, and it destroyed his sense of things. "There's a tranquillity about him and there always has been," Michael Codron says. "He's happy. There aren't that many, but he is a happy person. And that's why the schism that happened in his life took all of us totally by surprise. I remember him saying, 'You'll have to forgive me but something dramatic is happening that I haven't got total control of.' And that's as much as we knew." After having been friends for years with the biographer Claire Tomalin, he had fallen in love to such a degree that he felt it necessary to leave his wife. "There's a bit in 'Three Sisters' when Masha says, 'You read about love in books and you think you know what it's all about, and then it happens to you and you realize you hadn't understood anything about it at all up to that point,'" he says, when asked about this moment in his life. "Yes. It's very shattering. Anyway."

Tomalin was a couple of years ahead of him at Cambridge. He hadn't known her then, but when he used to buy undergraduate literary magazines he would encounter poems by someone called Claire Delavenay, and he remembers thinking what a romantic name that was. But they did not actually meet until they had left university and were both married—Delavenay to Nick Tomalin, a dashing journalist whom she'd met at Cambridge. The Tomalin marriage was difficult. Claire found herself stuck at home, working as a translator and taking care of four children while Nick became "a bolter," having one affair after another and leaving her sometimes for weeks or months at a time. Their third child died when he was a month old, and their fifth child was born with spina bifida, paralyzed from the chest down. Then, in 1973, Nick was killed by a missile in the Golan Heights, while covering the Yom Kippur War.

In 1981, Frayn and Tomalin settled together in Tomalin's house in Gloucester Crescent, in North London, where over the years they became part of a small literary coterie that lived on the street, including the playwright and actor Alan Bennett and the director Jonathan Miller. Tomalin worked in a messy study in the house and wrote biographies, of Jane Austen, Katherine Mansfield, Samuel Pepys, and Mary Wollstonecraft; Frayn took a small office around the corner. They lived there for twenty-two years; they moved last year to a house with a big garden in Richmond, in southwest London, an old two-story coach house, next door to a country mansion. Before they lived there, it was broken open by an architect into a sunny lattice of scraped wood and white walls and windows. Frayn works in a slope-ceilinged room with two walls of bookshelves and a view of the garden, at a computer with a flat-screen monitor, set up on a tidy desk. He is long and spindly, and when he sits, contracting himself neatly like a folding ruler into his armchair, he is still: the



"It's what I do."

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occasional crossing and uncrossing of his legs changes the lines of the room. "He's in a very tranquil frame of mind at the moment," Michael Codron says. "He and Claire are living out an idyll. That's the most difficult thing in the world to do, but they seem to be bringing it off."

Frayn wrote most directly about happiness in "A Landing on the Sun," in which a philosopher and a civil servant are charged with the task of analyzing what happiness consists of. "When I look back over my own experiences at the upper end of the register," the philosopher writes, "what I chiefly recall are moments of complete absorption in some conceptual problem. But the pleasure there was precisely my *unawareness* of my feelings—indeed, the loss of all sense of self." The beauty of the state in which one's self is lost, or hidden, or consciously put aside is something that preoccupies Frayn. One of the qualities he most admires in Chekhov is what he calls transparency: the sense that, in his writings, there is no trace at all of Chekhov the man. To Frayn, this erasure of self is the technique that allows Chekhov's characters, and, in the prose, the scenery and situations he describes, to themselves appear so vivid. It is Frayn's inclination, too, to write transparently, by erasing himself, which is one of the reasons that plays seem a more natural form for him than novels: in prose, however detached the exposition, there cannot help but be some sort of narrative voice, whereas in plays the characters seem to speak for themselves more convincingly.

That he writes both plays and novels successfully is remarkable, because so few writers do. Chekhov did; Beckett did; Somerset Maugham did. But the list of failures is far longer. It is not clear why this should be so. What is the crucial difference between them that makes their requirements as dissimilar as those of prose and poetry? Is it the severity and tightness of the play form—the time constraint, the structure of scenes and acts, the intimidating requirement that the action explain itself? Must a playwright have a certain aptitude for constraint and withdrawal? A distaste for superfluity and expansiveness? Thomas Wolfe, who tried and failed to make a go of it as a playwright, seems to have thought along these lines. Many years afterward, he said that "something in me, very strong and powerful, was groping toward a more full, expansive, and abundant expression of the theatre of life than the stage itself could physically compass: it was something that had to come out sooner or later, as a pent flood bursts above a dam." Such a sensation (which Frayn would probably never feel, much less express) does not, perhaps, bode especially well for prose, either, but it is certainly fatal for drama.

Henry James also made a disastrous foray into playwriting: some evidence suggests that he was never quite clear on the demands of the theatre (he required actors in one of his plays to "simply look as if they had just had tea," without the aid of any suggestive props such as cups and saucers), and he was, famously, booed off the stage on the opening night of his play "Guy Domville." But after this dispiriting interlude he reached the opposite conclusion from Wolfe: rather than relax into the relative bagginess and freedom of the novel, he would bring to novel-writing all the severity and discipline that he had learned from the theatre. Eschewing his old discursiveness, he resolved to adhere to what he called "the scenic method," which he described, in reference to "The Awkward Age," a novel composed almost entirely of dialogue, as "presented episodes, architecturally combined and each making a piece of the building, with no going behind, no *telling about* the figures save by their own appearance and action." What James was seeking by means of this method was "intensity": he wanted rigorously to prune out any nineteenth-century-style authorial chattiness, in order to produce novels as lean and reserved and tightly structured as plays. The intensity that James was seeking by removing himself is akin to the vividness that Frayn admires Chekhov for achieving by similar methods. But Frayn admires transparency as more than a literary technique: it seems, in the way he speaks about it, to be also a matter of character, almost a moral position, to see the world, or try to, as separate from himself—a thing with its own colors. For Frayn, the appeal of self-erasure seems to be, in part, a position against positions, against judgment—against, as he once put it, moral snobbery.

"The German playwright Friedrich Hebbel said that in a good play everyone is right," Frayn says. "I don't suppose he meant that you had to morally approve everyone, but I take it he meant that drama is people presenting themselves with the same force as they do in life, and feeling as justified about themselves as they do in life. If the playwright is taking sides, it's not very interesting, because in life it's not like that—there's no directorial figure, no writer, no God figure saying this guy's right and this guy's wrong. I have always tried to respect Hebbel's dictum." Of course, in less kind hands than Frayn's, authorial absence can be as forceful and as emotionally manipulative as presence, and it can feel more like cruelty toward the characters than like acceptance. In Hemingway's story "Hills Like White Elephants," for instance, which consists almost exclusively of dialogue, the absence of commentary is particularly brutal: the two characters are exposed on their own, without the softening of biographical or psychological explanation or even identifying names to excuse or relieve the harshness of sheer speech, and the bleakness of their situation is exacerbated by the authorial abandonment.

Some years ago, when "Noises Off" was running on Broadway, *The Atlantic Monthly* published a piece that concluded that Frayn's was the only play in town that was not, as the writer put it, trying to give the audience a "hotfoot." All the others were trying to make audience members feel that they weren't sufficiently guilty, or weren't sufficiently aware of some social problem. One of the most striking features of Frayn's work is the absence of bile. Nowhere is there the contempt for small vanities, the scorn for failure, the sour relishing of pride brought low, the bitter spitting at the greed and selfishness and viciousness of the world that are inescapable in most serious fiction of the past two hundred years. There are no real villains in Frayn's work—of either the grandly evil or the pettier modern variety. Frayn's satire, though acute, is of the gentlest sort: his characters, even the most minor and ludicrous, are not derided but affectionately ribbed, and their flaws only make them more lovable. "It has to do with a certain detachment," Neal Ascherson says. "He doesn't engage, to the extent of absolutely condemning somebody."

Frayn dislikes bile in other people's novels as well. He hates what he calls the "literature of denunciation"—the kind of fiction that emerges from the view that, as he puts it, "what writers should be doing is making people conscious of how inadequate and bad they are and how they don't respond adequately to the sufferings of others." Of V. S. Naipaul's novels, for instance, his favorite is Naipaul's uncharacteristically sweet fourth book, "A House for Mr. Biswas." "The way we writers knock our characters about!" Frayn once wrote. "We cast out all our devils into them, and then ritually destroy them. An infantile procedure, like children smacking their dolls for naughtiness."

Frayn is always praising people—other writers, his friends, his late parents, his children, his grandchildren. "He's a very appreciative man, which I am not," Nichols says. "Appreciative of other people's work, of personal conduct." Frayn dislikes being unfriendly even toward his characters, and so finds it extremely difficult to be unfriendly toward actual people. " 'Towards the End of the Morning' was a kind of roman à clef," Ascherson says, referring to a comic novel about the newspaper business that Frayn published in 1967. "There were real people in that novel, some of whom were dreadfully offended. Which I don't think Michael was capable of dealing with, frankly. I think he's developed protective armor about how he isn't going to hurt anybody, like a dentist." Frayn is not unaware of the limits of this trait. In his play "Benefactors," the most sympathetic character, David, is destroyed by it, as his wife, Jane, perceives when he refuses to acknowledge that his old friend Colin, who is married to Sheila, has turned against him:

> DAVID: Is there anything we can do for him, do you think?
> JANE: You mean, *help* him?
> DAVID: We're helping Sheila. We don't want to take sides.
> JANE: David, sides have been taken! Colin's taken them! Whatever side we're on, he's on the opposite one! . . .
> DAVID: Look, he may have decided he hates us—I don't know—but we don't have to hate him back.
> JANE: Sheila's right—you don't understand what it is, being hated. You think everyone else in the world is like yourself. . . .
> DAVID: Be no good if I went to see him? What do you think?
> JANE: It's not a virtue, David. It's a sort of moral blindness.

When asked about the absence of villainy in Frayn's work, Ascherson says, "He's a very English guy. He has that uplifted puritanism—that inability to admit that a character is to be utterly

Gahan Wilson

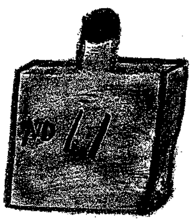
"Yes, Jimmy, this is how you'll look if you keep working out with your rubber strap."

condemned. He really does have a deep affection for the human race. Perhaps this is unfair, but he is slightly like that generation of young English officers who in 1945 entered places like Bergen-Belsen and never ever got over it, because—well, the world couldn't be like that. It couldn't be like that. Human beings just couldn't be like that. And they were."

Resistance to conceiving of Nazi-style evil became an issue in Frayn's life when his play "Copenhagen," about the physicists Niels Bohr and Werner Heisenberg, opened, in 1998. The play centers on a visit that Heisenberg paid to Bohr, his mentor and onetime close collaborator, in Copenhagen in 1941. Nobody knows for certain what they said to each other, but whatever it was made Bohr extremely angry and ended their friendship. In Frayn's play, Heisenberg is a complicated, sympathetic figure: he comes to Copenhagen to reveal to Bohr, at great risk to himself, that the Germans, under his leadership, are trying to create an atomic bomb. He also asks him whether it is morally acceptable for a scientist (on either side) to contribute to such a lethal project. The play implies that Heisenberg refused to do so for moral reasons: he knew a bomb was possible, but he deliberately sabotaged the project to keep such a weapon out of Hitler's hands.

After the play opened, this portrayal of Heisenberg attracted some angry criticism from people who felt that Frayn was avoiding the facts of the matter in order to give Heisenberg the benefit of the doubt. The historian Paul Lawrence Rose, in particular, accused Frayn of ignoring evidence that Heisenberg was fully committed to the Nazi atomic project, and failed to create a bomb in time only because of his own miscalculations. Whoever is right about the historical Heisenberg, it seems clear that if Frayn had shared Rose's view of the facts he would not have written the play. He would not have been attracted to an obviously evil Heisenberg. What interested him was the exculpating tangle of motives, and the idea that perhaps Heisenberg himself didn't understand what he was up to.

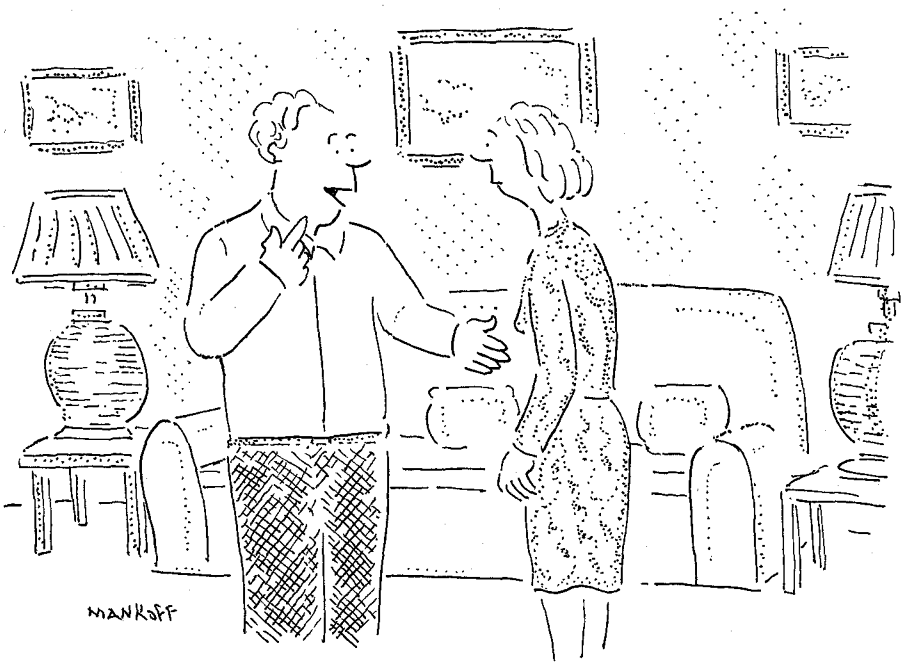
Behind Frayn's aversion to judgment lies a Wittgensteinian sense that people are, in the end, opaque to one another: that all we have to go on is what people say and what they do, and anything else is speculation. For that matter, we are scarcely more transparent to ourselves than we are to others, because if we are wise—reluctant to be taken in by our own internal propaganda—we learn about ourselves and others in the same way. To be sure, speech and action provide a decent blueprint, a set of points out of which a fairly detailed graph may be mapped; but whatever lies between those points (if anything) is impossible to know. Language, after all (as Wittgenstein saw and Frayn believes), can meaningfully refer only to public things: things in the world (like forks, or actions) that two people can point to and agree to name. Private things—pain, sensations, things concealed in the body and in consciousness—cannot really be part of language, since there is no way to know for sure that a word or a name refers consistently from person to person. "Thoughts and intentions, even one's own—perhaps one's own most of all—remain shifting and elusive," Frayn writes in a postscript to "Copenhagen" that explicitly makes the connection that he has made implicitly throughout the play between Heisenberg's uncertainty principle and the difficulty of pinning down psychological truth. "There is not one single thought or intention of any sort that can ever be precisely established." And, without information about that essential but unknowable stuff, judgment can find no purchase. *Ne rien comprendre c'est tout pardonner.*



This is, in effect, a kind of literary behaviorism. It is also a form of courtesy. Speculation about what drives other people and what is wrong with them is always possible, of course, but it is courteous to assume that such speculation is bound to be limited and inaccurate. It allows other people their privacy. This is another reason that Frayn seems less suited to novels than to plays. The central difference between novels and plays, in his view, is that in a novel you know what's going on inside at least one character's head, and in a play you do not. (In the late nineteen-eighties, having spent fifteen years writing plays, Frayn set out to write prose fiction again and found that he had forgotten how. In the process of finding his way back to interiority, he wrote a novel, "The Trick of It," in epistolary form—a kind of halfway point between plays and prose, in which interiority is expressed externally, unreliably, in a letter, as a play's character might express it in a monologue.)

It's not that Frayn can't describe inner lives, or can't create plausible characters; but there is always something slightly awkward about his ventures indoors, as though he had been left alone in someone else's room and felt that it would be not quite proper to look about too curiously, or to form opinions about anything that happened to catch his eye, when he ought perhaps not to have seen it in the first place. It's not just that he doubts, for philosophical reasons, that we can know other minds but that he seems to prefer things that way: it's more decent. It is also, perhaps, more interesting. Frayn has always written about situations in which the normal difficulties of communication are artificially exacerbated: "The Russian Interpreter," "Clouds" (a play from 1976), "Copenhagen," "Spies," and "Democracy" all describe situations in which people speak different languages, or political systems in which secrecy and deception are the rule and spying is necessary. Even "Noises Off" could be said to fall into this category, since farces—with their many doors, and characters hidden in closets, and confusions of motive and whereabouts—exaggerate and physicalize the difficulties of figuring out what other people are up to.

Many writers describe a process by which characters seem to become independent of their author and start to speak for themselves, but Frayn's relationship with his characters is, even by these standards, respectful rather than intimate. "You have to come to some arrangement with them, as it were," he says. "You have to persuade them to commit the murder or whatever you want them to do, and in return you have to concede that they will get something they want. Writing fiction is like industrial management. You've got this plan for this work you want done, and you've got a workforce that just wants to get through the job and go home and get on with their lives. Somehow you've got to persuade them, cajole them, bully them, bribe them, or something, to do at least part of what you want." It is true that many writers feel something like this about their characters, but in Frayn's case it seems that he actually prefers to yield some control to forces outside himself: first to his characters, and then to his director. It is as though he sought to move, as quickly as possible, from the position of the writer to that of the audience. ("The essence of the story is that the audience doesn't participate," he wrote once of the theatre.) His stage directions tend to be sparse; recent plays such as "Copenhagen" and "Democracy" have virtually no directions at all.



"But that was the old me—this is the remix."

Although Frayn was young and impressionable during the height of nineteen-fifties avant-garde theatre, he was never much drawn to it. The closest he came to trying a Beckett-style experiment was "Here," a play that is a sore spot with him, even though he likes it, because it flopped in London when it opened, in 1993. "Here" involves a young couple, Cath and Phil, who move into a studio apartment in Act I, sit around inside it in Act II, and, in Act III, move out again. It is, in part, an exercise in mundane objectivity: an attempt to show how we actually speak to each other ("Cath: No? / Phil: No. No? / Cath: No. / Phil: What? / Cath: Nothing"), how we inhabit rooms, and how we experience time as it passes (at one point Phil becomes fascinated by a clock, and traces out loud the passage of the second hand around the face for nearly a minute—a device that forcefully unites the play's time with that of the audience). The play is, in other words, a self-conscious version of what a play usually is; namely, a presentation of action taking place in real time, in the present, in a space that, though it is definitely not the same one occupied by the audience, is experienced as very close by.

When Henry James retreated from the theatre back to the novel, this is one of the qualities that he was hoping to preserve by means of his "scenic method": the sense of present immediacy and proximity that is conveyed by dialogue and scenes, even when they are couched in the past tense. But in recent years Frayn has been doing the opposite: rather than importing the dramatic present into novels, he has been importing the no-time and no-place of narrative description into his plays. When he first sampled this technique, in "Benefactors," he had the characters tell bits of story, but he disguised those narrative interludes as conversational reminiscences. In "Copenhagen," characters step out of the action to narrate directly to the audience, but still the bulk of the play consists of ordinary dialogue.

In "Democracy," dialogue and narrative have become nearly indistinguishable. The characters take turns explaining the intricacies of the German political situation, and whether they're talking to the audience or to a character onstage scarcely seems to matter, because there is little sense of conventional scenes—discrete temporal, geographical, and emotional units. Instead, the play is cut like a fast-paced film: a pair of characters on one side of the stage will exchange three or four sentences, then another character or pair will speak equally briefly, and then the first pair will speak again. We don't know whether these snatches of speech are consecutive or are interrupted by days or weeks, nor do we know where they take place. The stage directions of the play are nonspecific, because the settings are nonspecific: we assume that the spy and his handler talk in some café or other, and that Brandt and his colleagues meet somewhere in the Palais Schaumburg, but, beyond that, place is unimportant.

It is as though, in his lifelong quest for Chekhovian transparency, Frayn had managed to take another step toward self-erasure: he has managed to make his characters not only independent of him but also independent of their circumstances, of the play in which he has placed them. They tell the story on their own, without his assistance; they have taken over his work. It is as though, in his later years, Frayn had managed to find his way backward, all the way from the strained manipulations of farce to the British philosophy he admired in university: that which doesn't seek to change people or criticize people or guide people, even make-believe people, but "seeks merely to study and perhaps oil the conceptual machinery and then to put it back more or less as it was." ♦

FICTION

OLD FRIENDS

BY THOMAS McGUANE

John Briggs was made aware of the fact that some sort of problem existed for his friend and former schoolmate Erik Faucher by the sheer accident of a request for information from their former class secretary, Everett Hoyt, who in the thirty years since they’d graduated from Yale had hardly set foot out of New Haven. With ancestors buried at the old Center Church, in spitting distance of both the regicide Dixwell and Benedict Arnold’s wife, Hoyt was paralyzed by a sense of generational permanence. People said that if he hadn’t got into Yale he wouldn’t have gone to college at all but would have remained at home, waiting to bury his parents. Now, in place of any real social life, he edited the alumni newsletter, often accompanying his requests for official items with small indiscretions. (He called these tidbits, which he delivered with a certain giddiness, “Entre News”; they generally concerned marital failures or business malfeasances, and they almost never made it into the alumni letter.)

Hoyt phoned Briggs at his summer home, in Montana, on a nondescript piece of prairie that Briggs had inherited from a farmer uncle, and, while pretending to hunt up class news, insinuated that Faucher, having embezzled a fortune from a bank in Boston, had gone into hiding. “I’ve heard through private sources that our class scofflaw is now headed your way,” he said.

Briggs waited for Hoyt’s giggle to subside. “I hope so,” he snapped. “I’ve missed Erik.” But once he’d hung up the phone he began to worry that Faucher might actually come.

Faucher’s ex-wife, Carol, having declined to account for the time difference between Montana and the East Coast, called at five the next morning. “So very nice to hear your voice,” Briggs said. “How are you?”

“I’m calling about Erik. He has not been behaving sensibly at all.”

Briggs absorbed this in silence. He knew that if he said anything at all he’d have to stand up for Faucher, and he wasn’t sure that he wanted to.

“Carol, you’ve been divorced a long time,” he said finally.

“We have mutual interests. I don’t know what sort of plan he has in place. And there’s Elizabeth.” Elizabeth was their daughter.

GLEN BAXTER

“I’m sure he’s made a very sensible plan.”

“I don’t want Elizabeth to wind up sleeping in her car. Or me, either, for that matter.”

“I don’t think your argument is with me.” This was in response to her tone.

“Did I say it was? I’m just saying, ‘Help.’ I’m saying, ‘It’s about time you did.’ ”

When Briggs failed to reply, she added, “I know where he’s going and who to put on his trail.”

Briggs’s friendship with Faucher had been long and intermittent. Arbitrarily assigned as roommates at the boarding school they’d attended before Yale—a place built with iron-ore and taconite dollars and modelled on English public schools—the boys had grown up believing that America was a British fantasy and that the true work of the nation was undertaken by pencil-wristed Episcopalians who sang their babies to sleep with Blake’s “Jerusalem” and uttered mild orotundities like “great good fortune” and “safe as houses.” They had also been sold the notion of loyalty, much as the credulous are sold the far-fetched basics of religion.

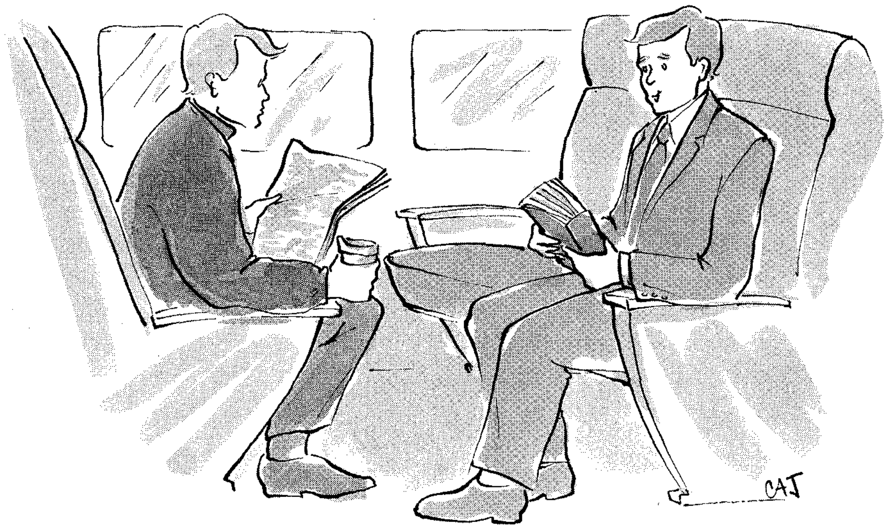
Briggs and Faucher had become lifelong friends without ever quite getting past the fact that their discomfort with each other occasionally boiled over into active detestation. After college, each had been in the other’s wedding, and they had lived, for a short time, in the same neighborhood in New Haven while they tried to launch their careers. As Briggs began to travel more and more, and Faucher relocated to Boston, their relationship had been reduced, for the most part, to memories, and not ones that either man particularly enjoyed revisiting—though they continued to make sentimental phone calls on holidays and to perform euphoric reënactments of soccer triumphs on the rare occasions when they were actually together. In the subsequent quarter century, although they had spent quite a bit of time begrudging each other’s successes and savoring the failures, thanks to that burdensome code of loyalty, each had done the other a favor. When Briggs was in his twenties and had sunk everything he had into a small mining company in Alberta with ruinous short-term expenses, Faucher had rescued him from bankruptcy by finding a buyer. And when Faucher, on assignment as part of a Boston Congregationalists’ outreach to hungry Guatemalans, was pulled from the second story of a burning whorehouse, Briggs had called every classmate and pal in journalism in a desperate stand to keep the news out of the papers.

For decades, Briggs and Faucher had each been searching for an unforgivable trait in the other that would relieve him of this abhorrent, possibly lifelong burden. But, now that they had years of history and continuity to contend with, it had become harder and harder to imagine a liberating offense.

Faucher turned up one evening while Briggs was preparing his notes for a company stalemate in Delaware, for which he was serving as an independent negotiator. It surprised Briggs that Faucher had managed to find him at all, having ventured forth from the Hertz counter at the Billings airport with nothing but a state map. He arrived with a girl he’d picked up on the way, whose feral screeches in the upstairs guest room were soon clearly audible to Briggs. Her name was Marjorie, Faucher said—“Marge, short for margarine, the cheap spread.” This was not the sort of remark that Briggs appreciated and was therefore exactly in the style to which Faucher had gravitated over the years. Around midnight, Faucher reeled downstairs to inquire, with a hitch of his head, “Do you want some of this?”

“Oh, no,” Briggs said. “All for you.”

Thereafter, Marjorie, who seemed an attractive and reasonable girl once she started sobering up, came downstairs to complain that Faucher had asked her to brush his teeth for him. Briggs advised her to be patient—Faucher would soon realize that he had to brush his own teeth and would then go to sleep. Briggs offered her the rollout on the sunporch, but she returned to Faucher wearily, having first gone to the front window to cast a longing eye at the rental car. She wore a negligee that just reached her hips and, as she slowly climbed the stairs, presented a view that was somewhat veterinary in quality. The aroma of gin trailed her. When Briggs went to bed, he thought, I don’t know anyone who drinks gin anymore. He couldn’t understand why this



"It's an epic novel about a guy who's trying to sell his car."

• •

fact annoyed him. A full moon showing through the blinds left bands of cool light on the walls. The CD of Segovia that he'd put on at minimum volume to help him sleep cycled on—"Recuerdos de la Alhambra," again and again.

He hadn't been asleep for long when he was awakened by noises. In the kitchen there were intruders. Briggs heard them thumping around and opening cupboards and speaking in muffled tones. He wondered for a moment if he had forgotten that he was expecting someone. Once out of bed, he slipped into his closet, where his twelve-gauge resided on parallel coat hooks for just such a time as this. Briggs quietly chambered two shells and lifted the barrels until the lock closed.

In the living room, he knelt behind the big floral wing chair that faced the fireplace and its still dying embers. From here, he could see the intruders as silhouettes, moving around the kitchen, briefly illuminated by the refrigerator light. He lifted the gun and, resting it on the back of the chair, levelled it at the closest figure. Only then did he recognize the man as his nearest neighbor, with whom he shared a water right from the irrigation ditch and a relationship that strained to be pleasant; the other intruder was the man's wife, a snappish, leanly attractive farm woman, who was less diplomatic in concealing her distaste for Briggs. Listening to their conversation, Briggs understood that they had expected him to be out of town and that they were raiding his refrigerator for beer. On reflection, he decided that confronting them would create waves of difficulty for him in the future, and that this episode would be best forgotten or set aside for use another time. So he put the gun away and crept back to bed. The neighbors departed a short time later with a farewell fling of beer cans into his roses.

Faucher's voice came from the top of the stairs. "Were those people looking for me?" he demanded.

"No, Erik. Go back to sleep. They've gone," Briggs replied.

Marjorie was the first up: she had a remedial geometry class to teach at the high school. "Always a challenge after a long night," she explained to Briggs. She wore a pleated blue skirt and a pale-green sweater that buttoned at the throat. Her hair was drawn back from a prettily modelled forehead. She was at the stove, one hand on a hip, the other managing a spatula. "Potatoes O'Brien and eggs. Then I've got to run."

"You don't have to cook."

"Oh, I can't have a day with missing pieces." She cast a brilliant smile his way, and held it just long enough to suggest that he'd missed the boat. Erik wouldn't be getting up for breakfast, because, Marjorie explained, he had an upset tummy. She held the spatula in the air while she said this, suggesting with a quoting motion that she was only repeating the facts as they'd been given to her. Then she made an upset-tummy face. Marjorie reminded Briggs of teachers he'd had—punctilious, too ready to use physical gestures to explain the obvious, a hint of the scold. They ate together with the unexpected comfort of strangers at a diner. She paid absolute attention to her food, looking up at him intermittently. She raised a forefinger.

"First thing he said to me was 'You're amazing.' I have learned that when they tell you you're amazing it's over before it starts."

"Just as well. Neither of you was feeling any pain."

"I never have any idea what will happen when I get drunk. But why would you get drunk if you knew what was going to happen?" she said. "You probably get off just watching other people make mistakes. That's not a nice trait, Mr. Briggs!"

She smoothed her skirt and checked it for crumbs. "I'm out of here," she said as she stood up. "What's the weather like?" She went to the window and craned to see the sky. "Not too bad. O.K., bye."

When Briggs heard the shower start upstairs, he went outside and smelled the new morning wind coming through the fields. There were a few small white clouds gathering in the east, and a quarter mile off he could see a harrier working its way just over the surface of the hills. From time to time, it swung up to pivot on a wingtip, and then resumed its sweep. The window of the upstairs bathroom opened and a wisp of steam came out, followed by the head of Erik Faucher. "John! What a morning!" Briggs was filled with a sudden, unexpected fondness for Faucher. This feeling lasted only until Faucher began singing in the shower, and Briggs found his presence insufferable again.

Faucher appeared in the yard in light-colored pleated pants, a hemp belt, and a long-sleeved blue cotton shirt. Though his hair was gunmetal gray, he still had the vigorous black eyebrows that Briggs associated with his French blood. Raising them, he told Briggs that he'd flown in from Boston, following an itinerary that was slightly less convenient than a trip to Kazakhstan, now that centralized air-routing had made Montana oddly more remote. He didn't seem tired or hung over, and his frame looked well exercised. "I see Marge made off with the rental car," he said.

Briggs made him some coffee and a piece of toast, which he nibbled cautiously while reading the obituaries in a week-old Billings *Gazette*. "One of these Indians dies, they list every relative in the world. This one has three columns of kinfolk—Falls Down, Bird in Ground, Spotted Bear, Tall Enemy, Pretty on Top. Where does it end? And all their affiliations! The True Cross Evangelical Church, the Whistling Water Clan, the Bad War Deeds Clan. All I ever belonged to was Skull and Bones, and I ain't too proud of that! So please don't list it when I go. I'm no Indian!"

Briggs eyed the bright prairie sun that was working its way across the window behind the sink. He treasured his solitary spells in this house, as infrequent as they were, and he tended to waste very few minutes of them. This one, it seemed, was doomed.

"Look at us, John, two lonely middle-aged guys."

"Filled with hope."

"Not me, John. But I'm expecting that Montana will change all that. One of my great regrets," Faucher said solemnly, "is that when we were young, married, and almost always drunk we didn't take a little time out to fuck each other's beautiful wives."

"That time has come and gone," Briggs said.

"A fellow should smell the roses once in a while. Now those two are servicing others. Perhaps in intimate moments they tell their new men how unsatisfactory we were."

"Very plausible."

Their wives had despised each other. Carol was a classic, now extinct type from Cold Spring Harbor, New York. Having attended Mount Holyoke, she had felt it her mission to carry forward to new generations the Mount Holyoke world view. When their daughter, Elizabeth, was expelled from the college for drug use, Faucher's suggestion that there were other, possibly more forgiving institutions had placed him permanently outside the wall that sheltered his wife and child. When, even with certified rehabilitation, Elizabeth failed to be reinstated at Mount Holyoke, she lost interest in college altogether and joined the Navy, where she was immediately happy as a machinist's mate. Faucher was bankrupt by then, a result of habitual overextension, and his inability to support Carol in the style to which she had been accustomed led to divorce, and to Carol's current position as a receptionist at a hearing-aid outlet on Route 90 between Boston and Natick. Relatively few years had brought them to this point and neither quite understood how.

Briggs had always been quite uncomfortable with Carol, and he had been greatly relieved when it was no longer necessary for the two of them to speak. His own wife, Irena, had been a beauty, a big-eyed, russet-haired trilingual girl from Ljubljana whom he'd met at a trade conference in Milan, where she was translating and he was negotiating for a Yugoslav-American businessman whose family's property had been nationalized by the Communists. John and Irena were married for only a few years—long enough for her to come to know and loathe the Fauchers. Briggs wasn't sure what else had gone wrong, except that she'd never much liked America and had been continually exasperated by Americans' assumption that Briggs had somehow rescued her. In the end, aroused by the independence of Slovenia, she grew homesick and left, but not before remarking that Carol was a pig and Erik was a goat.

All of which lent Faucher's wife-swapping lament its own particular comedy.

"Don't worry about me overstaying my welcome," Faucher said. "I'm quite considerate that way."

"Farthest thing from my mind," Briggs said. "Let's go for a walk."

"Do you have an answering machine?"

"Yes, and I've turned it on."

"A walk would be good," Faucher said. "We'll teach those fools to wait for the beep."

"I want you to see the homestead cemetery. It's been fenced off for eighty years and still has all the old prairie flowers that are gone everywhere else. I have some forebears there."

They followed a seasonal creek toward the low hills in the west where the late-morning sun illuminated towering white clouds. The air was so clear that their shadows could be seen on the grass hillsides like birthmarks. Faucher seemed happier.

"I'm so glad to get out of Boston," he said. "It was unbelievably muggy. There was a four-day teachers' demonstration across from my apartment—you know, where they go, 'Hey, hey, ho, ho, we don't want to . . .' whatever. Four days. Sweating and listening to those turds chant."

Briggs could see the grove of ash and alders at the cemetery just emerging from the horizon as they hiked. About twice a summer, very old people with California or Washington plates came, mowed the grass, and otherwise tended the few graves: most homesteaders had been starved out before they'd had time to die. These were the witnesses.

As they came over a slight rise, a sheet of standing rainwater was revealed in an old buffalo wallow; a coyote lit out across the water with unbelievable acceleration, leaving fifteen yards of pluming rooster tails behind him. Faucher gazed for a moment, then said, "That was no dog. You could run a hundred of them by me and I'd never say it was a dog. Not me."

At the little graveyard, Briggs said, "All screwed by the government." He was standing in front of his family graves, which were just like the others—names, dates, nothing else. "Cattle haven't been able to get in here since the thirties. The plants are here, the old heritage flowers and grasses. Surely you think that's interesting."

"I'm going to have to take your word for it."

"Erik, look at what's in front of you," Briggs said, more sharply than he'd intended, but Faucher just stared off into the distance, not seeming to hear him.

Needle and thread, buffalo, and orchard grass spread like a billowing counterpane around the small headstones. Shining through were shooting stars, pasqueflowers, prairie smoke, arrow-leaf balsamroot, and wild roses, amid small clouds of bees and darting blue butterflies. A huge cottonwood sheltered it all. Off to one side was a vigorous bull thistle that had passed unnoticed by the people in battered sedans, hard old people who didn't talk, taking turns with the scythe. They looked into cellar holes and said, "We grew up here." No sense in conveying any of this to Faucher, who was mooning by the old fence.

"I could stand a nap," he said.

"Then that's what you shall have. But in the meantime please try to get something out of these surroundings. It's tiresome just towing you around."

"I was imagining laying my weary bones among these dead. In the words of Chief Joseph, 'From here I will fight no more forever.' Who was in the house last night?"

"That was my neighbor and his wife. They stopped by for a beer."

"Well, I guess you know your own society. That would seem very strange in Boston."

From the alcove off his bedroom, which served as an office, Briggs could look through the old glass windows with their bubbles and imperfections and see Faucher sitting on the lawn, arms propped behind him, face angled into the sun like a girl in a Coppertone ad. Briggs was negotiating for a tiny community in Delaware that was being blackmailed by a flag manufacturer for tax millage against purported operating costs, absent which the manufacturer threatened to close the plant and strand two hundred and fifty-one minimum-wage workers. A North Carolina village that had lost its pulp mill wanted the flag company, and even if Briggs worked as hard as he could one town would die.

He explained this to Faucher as they drove to town for dinner. Faucher made a waving movement with his hand and said "*Hasta la vista*" to whichever town it was that had to disappear. But it was otherwise a nice ride down the valley, mountains emerging below fair-weather altocumulus clouds, small ranches on either side at the heads of sparkling creeks. A self-propelled swather followed by ravens moved down a field, pivoting nimbly at the end of each row, while in the next meadow, already gleaned, a wheel-line sprinkler emitted a low fog on the regrowth. A boy in a straw hat stood at a concrete headgate and, turning a wheel, let a flood of irrigation water race down a dusty ditch.

Town was three churches, a row of bars, a hotel with a restaurant, and a filling station. Each church had a framed announcement board standing in front, the Catholic with Mass schedules, the Lutheran with a passage from the Bible, and the Evangelical with a warning. The bars, likewise, had bright signs inviting ranchers, families, sportsmen, and motorcyclists, respectively. Entirely different kinds of vehicles were parked in front of each: old sedans in front of the ranchers' bar, pickup trucks in front of the local video-gaming youth-cult stop, and in front of the hotel some foreign models from Bozeman and Livingston. The clouds were moving fast now, and when Briggs got out of the car the hotel towering over him looked like the prow of a ship crossing a pale-blue ocean.

Faucher scanned his menu vigorously. "My God, this all looks good," he said. "And it'll look even better after a stunning bourbon-and-ditch." He was like a vampire coming to life at sundown; pale flames arose beneath his skin with each cocktail.

They ordered their dinner from a ruddy-faced girl who seemed excited by every choice they made. She had a Fritz the Cat tattoo on her upper arm, which Faucher peered at over the top of his menu. Briggs asked for a bottle of Bandol as well, and, when the candles had been lit, he assumed that it was time for Faucher to make himself plain.

But then the mayor came to the table, with the vibrant, merry hustle with which he generally drew attention to himself. Briggs introduced him to Faucher, who smiled patiently and stared at the man's fringed vest. Following the local con-

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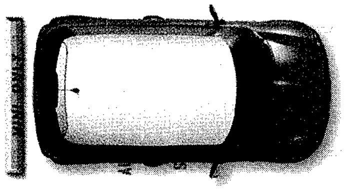

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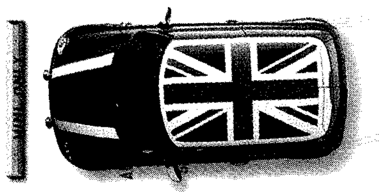

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vention, the mayor asked Briggs when he'd got back.

"I've been back about five times this summer," Briggs said. "From Tanzania, Berlin, Denver, Surinam." He was always exasperated at being asked this question. The mayor held his head in his hands.

"Surinam! Never heard of it! Denver I've heard of! What's in Surinam?"

"Bauxite."

"*Baux*—"

"Pal," Faucher said. "Give it a rest. We're trying to eat." He made a shooing motion and the mayor left. Faucher raised his eyebrows as he asked Briggs, "How can we miss him if he won't go away?"

The last time Briggs had seen Faucher, he had been insuring marine cargo out of a nice office on Old Colony Avenue in Boston and doing rather well, especially in the early days when Everett Hoyt had tipped him off to opportunities with former classmates. Now, Faucher said, he was an investment adviser at a tiny merchant bank in Boston. He liked to meet his clients in St. Louis Square on warm spring days (he had a key) to lay out the year's strategy—clients who were charmed by his arrival on a Raleigh ten-speed. He kept a hunter-jumper at Beverly and dropped into equestrian talk to baffle the credulous, using terms like *levade* and *piaffe* and *volte* to describe the commonplace trades he made, or comparing a sustained investment strategy to such esoterica as Raimondo D'Inzeo's taking the Irish Bank at Aachen on the great Merano. His own equestrian activities, he admitted, consisted of jumping obstacles that would scarcely weary a poodle, in the company of eight- and nine-year-old girls, under the tutelage of the roaring Madame Schacter, a tyrant in jodhpurs. Still, for his clientele, horses and yachts were reassuring entities, things to which one could turn one's attention when times were good.

Current times, however, were not at all good. Once, Faucher had been able to make cavalier decisions about his clients' investments; lately, they trusted him less and obliged him to chase obscure indices across the moonscape of foreign equities.

The dining room was full, and the neighboring bar nearly so. Briggs spotted Marjorie at the bar but thought it best not to mention it.

Faucher said, "John, I've got to tell

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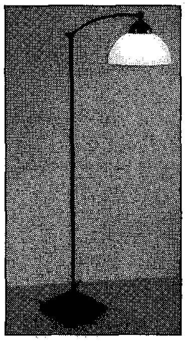

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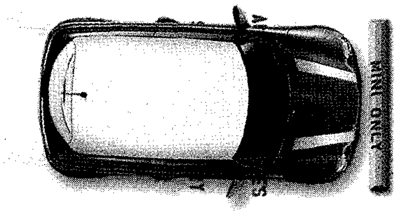

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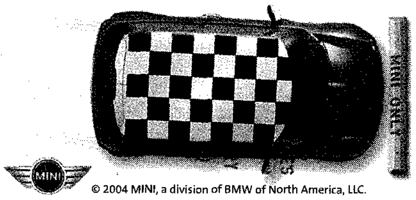

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you, I'm burning out. Nothing makes me happy anymore. I need new work. I want to be more like you. I need a gimmick. You get the time-zone watch from Sharper Image, and the rest is a walk in the park. Whereas my job is to reassure people who are afraid to lose what they have because they don't know how they got it in the first place. John, it's not that I mind lying, but I like variety and I'm not getting it." His face was mottled with an emotion that Briggs found difficult to fathom. "I desperately wish to be a cowboy," Faucher concluded.

"That family"—he added, pointing conspicuously at a nearby table where a rancher, his wife, and their three nearly grown children were at their meal—"have been here for an hour and haven't spoken to each other once. Don't these people know how to have fun?" The family heard this, the father glaring into the space just over his plate, his wife grinning in fear at a mustard jar. "We do that when we hate people," Faucher said.

"I don't think they hate each other, Erik."

"Well, it sure looks like it! I've never seen such depressing people."

Marjorie proceeded from the bar with a tall, colorful drink. She was wearing a red tunic with military buttons over a short skirt and boots, her hair pulled tight and tied straight atop her head with a silver ribbon. Briggs was glad to see her: she looked full of life. She said, "May I?"

Briggs quickly got to his feet and pulled out a chair, steadying her arm as she sat. Faucher looked glum. He said in an unconvincing monotone, "Sorry I missed you this morning. I understand you cooked a marvellous breakfast."

"It filled us up, didn't it?" she said to Briggs.

"All we could eat and no leftovers," Briggs agreed.

"What'd you do with the rental car?" Faucher barked.

"In front of the bank, keys under the seat."

Faucher lost interest in the car. "Not like I'll need it," he said with a moan.

The ranch family stood without looking at one another, an action that obliged at least two of them to survey the crown molding on the walls. The father glared at Faucher and dribbled some coins to the table from a huge paw while his waitress scowled from across the room. Karaoke had started at the bar, and a beaming wheat farmer was singing "That's Amore."

"Can I get a menu?" Marjorie asked, craning around the room.

"Has it possibly occurred to you that we're having a private conversation?" Faucher said.

Marjorie stopped all animation for a moment. "Oh, I'm so sorry." She looked crushed as she arose. Briggs tried to smile and opened his hands helplessly. She gave him a little wave, paused uncertainly, picked up her drink, then turned toward the bar and was gone. Briggs's face was red. He practically shouted, "I'm surprised you have any friends at all!"

"I only have one: you."

"Well, don't count on that, if you continue in this vein."

"I suppose it made sense for me to change planes twice and rent a car to have you address me with such loftiness," Faucher wailed. "I came to you in need, but your ascent to the frowning classes must make that unclear."

After dinner, they had a glass of brandy. Marjorie appeared on the karaoke floor and managed to raise the volume as she belted out "Another Somebody Done Somebody Wrong Song," followed immediately by a ghastly imitation of Cher, all pursed lips and slumberous eyes, doing "I Got You Babe." She directed various Frug moves and Vegas gestures Faucher's way. Feeling under attack, Faucher urged Briggs to call for the bill and pay it promptly. "I can't believe how quickly things have gone downhill," he said, hunched over as if under mortar fire.

Marjorie followed them out of the bar. She was so angry she moved in jerks. She walked straight over to Briggs and said, "You think you're above all this, don't you?" Then she slapped him across the face, so astonishing him that he neither raised a protective hand nor averted the now stinging cheek. "You want another one?" she inquired, lips flattened against her teeth.

"I think I'll hold off," Briggs said.

"Ask yourself what Jesus would do," Faucher suggested.

Marjorie whirled on him, and Briggs hurried away toward the boarded-up mercantile store where he'd parked; Faucher joined him. When they got to the car, they looked back to see Marjorie's friends restraining her theatrically by the arms. A cowboy with a goatee and a jet-black Stetson stared ominously as they were forced to pass close to him in order to get out of the lot.

"Don't drive next to them, for Chrissakes!" Faucher said. "The big one is about to come out of the bag!"

Faucher mused as they drove south into the piney hills and grassland. "People have become addicted to hidden causes. That's why you were the one to get slapped. They've been trained to mistrust anything that's right in front of their eyes. Oh, John, my path has been uneven. I've made so many enemies. Some of them intend to hunt me with dogs."

"Outlast them." Briggs listlessly watched the road for deer, vaguely hoping that whoever happened to be hunting Faucher with dogs would be lucky enough to catch him.

"I hope I can. Really, I've come here because you never quite give up on me, do you?"

"We are old friends," Briggs droned.

"Perhaps once I'm a cowboy you'll invest your remarks with greater meaning. Anyway, to continue my saga: I knew the noose was tightening, but I had been so diligent over the years at helping my clients improperly state assets for death taxes that I expected them to drop all complaints against me."

It seemed that Faucher had lost important inhibitions, however; he'd crossed the line, running afoul of the law at several points, including attempted blackmail. When one of his clients, with whom he had reached a mutually satisfactory agreement trading forgiveness for secrecy, died, snoopy children arrived in Faucher's world, followed by investigators, and, "*Net-net*, I'm on the run."

Just before sunrise, Briggs heard Faucher calling to him. He climbed the stairs, pulling on a sweatshirt and shorts, and entered the guest room. He found Faucher kneeling next to the window, curtains pulled back slightly, gesturing for Briggs to join him.

In the yard below, two men stood smoking next to a vehicle with government plates. "They're here for me, John," Faucher said. "I can't believe you did this. Now I'm going to jail."

"You know perfectly well that I didn't do this," Briggs said. But nothing could prevent him from feeling unreasonably guilty.

"Judas Iscariot—that's how I shall always know you."

They carried Faucher away. Briggs ran alongside in an L. L. Bean bathrobe pouring out offers of help, but Faucher waved him off like a man shooing flies.

The weather began to change, and the high white clouds moved across the horizon, leaving ghostly streaks in their place. One quiet afternoon, while Briggs was going over the casework he'd take on after the demise of the town in Delaware—mine mitigation in Manitoba, bike paths, a public swimming pool, a library wing given in exchange for ground permanently poisoned by cyanide—the phone rang. It was Carol. She brought him the news that Faucher was going to prison. He had been ruinously disagreeable in court, inflating the sentences to which his crimes had already given rise. She aired this as yet another grievance, as though little good could be extracted from Faucher now. "You were with him, John. Why didn't you help him?"

"I didn't know how to help him. We were just spending time together."

"You were just spending time together?"

"I'm afraid that's it. I feel I wasn't very perceptive."

"You have my agreement on that," Carol said. "He left you literally eager for imprisonment. You had a chance to put him back on his feet and you let him fall."

"Well, I don't know the facts. I—"

"You don't need to know the facts. You need to listen to what I'm telling you."

"Carol, I don't think you understand how tiresome you've become."

"Is that your way of commiserating with me?"

"Yes," Briggs said simply. "Yes, Carol, it is."

At times, Briggs worried that there *was* something he should have done. The whole experience had been like missing a catch on the high trapeze: the acrobat is pulling away from you, falling into the distance. Or perhaps the acrobat is pulling you off your own trapeze. Neither thought was pleasant.

It was inevitable that Briggs would get worked over once again for the newsletter. Hoyt wanted to know how Briggs had found Faucher. "Breathing," Briggs said.

"You've got good air out there," Hoyt said. "I'll give you that."

That November, while on his way to the town in North Carolina that he had saved from oblivion, Briggs stopped in Boston, rented a car, and drove to the prison at Walpole. Faucher refused to see him. In the pale-green visitors' room, Briggs rose slowly to acknowledge the uniformed custodian who bore the rejection. He was furious.

But once he was seated on the plane, drink in hand, looking out onto the runway at men pushing carts, a forklift wheeling along a train of red lights, a neighboring jet pushing back, he felt a little better. His second drink was delivered reluctantly by a harried stewardess—and only because Briggs told her that he was on his way to his mother's funeral. At this point, a glow seemed to form around Briggs's seatmate and Briggs struck up a conversation with him, ordering drinks for both of them as soon as the plane was airborne. The seatmate, an unfriendly black man who worked for Prudential Insurance, actually was going to a funeral, the funeral of a friend, and this revelation triggered a slightly euphoric summary of Briggs's friendship with Faucher, delivered in remarkable detail, considering that Briggs's companion was trying to read. Briggs concluded his description of his visit to the prison and Faucher's refusal to see him by raising his arms in the air and crying, "Hallelujah!," a gesture that made him realize, instantly, that he had had enough to drink. The seatmate narrowed his eyes, and when Briggs explained that, at long last, that chapter of his life was over, the man, turning back to his open book, said wearily, "Do you actually believe that?" ♦

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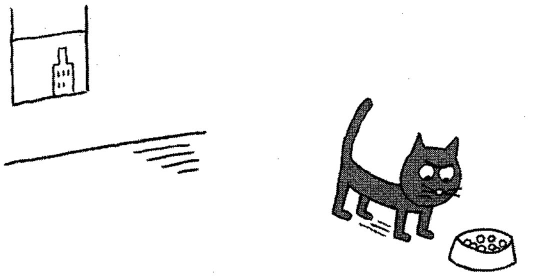


THE THEATRE

RUNNING WILD

"Richard III" and "Reckless."

BY JOHN LAHR

Call me old-fashioned, but on the opening page of my copy of Shakespeare's "Richard III" I don't see any stage direction that reads "Enter King and Court to portentous swelling music and vulgar pantomime." The director Peter DuBois's first gesture in his new production (at the Public) is to smudge the canvas. Instead of beginning the play as Shakespeare intended, with the deformed Richard, Duke of Gloucester, exposing his diabolical wound and wit to the audience from an empty stage, DuBois externalizes what should be a startling and seductive moment of confession. Here Richard enters and approaches King Edward IV's throne with his back to the audience; his famous first words, which are meant to open his manipulative case for murder—"Now is the winter of our discontent / Made glorious summer by this son of York"—are voiced over the dumb show. At a stroke, Richard's turmoil and vainglory are generalized, his crucial relationship to the audience skewed, and the production misses its chance to capitalize on the fact that Richard sees himself as a master performer. ("I can add colors to the chameleon, / Change shapes with Proteus for advantages, / And set the murderous Machiavel to school," he boasts in "Henry VI, Part III.") When Richard does finally take us directly into his confidence in DuBois's version, the emphasis of his first words lies on his external deformity, not on his more profound and mysterious internal grievance. "I, that am not shaped for sportive tricks, / Nor made to court an amorous looking-glass . . . / I, that am curtailed of this fair proportion, / Cheated of feature by dissembling Nature, / Deformed, unfinished, sent before my time / Into this breathing world, scarce half made up . . . / Why I, in this weak piping time of peace, / Have no delight to pass away the time," he says, thrusting himself in front of us more as a victim than as a virtuoso of evil.

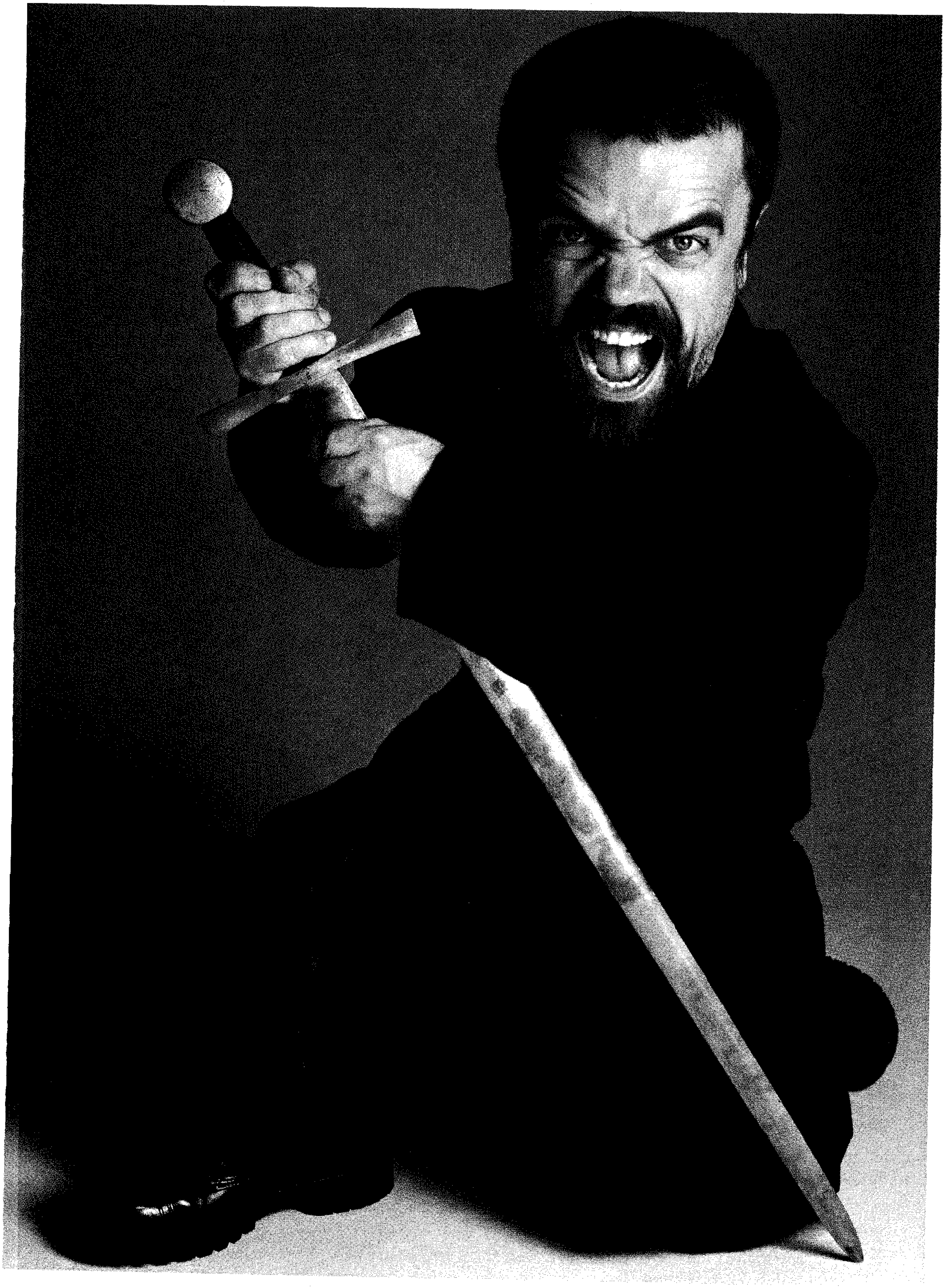
Peter Dinklage, who plays Richard—the second-longest Shakespearean role, after Hamlet—does not have to skitter across the stage on crutches, as Antony Sher did in the 1984 Royal Shakespeare production, or contort his spine to the point of physical injury to convey the appearance of a "bunch-backed toad," as Simon Russell Beale did in the R.S.C.'s 1992 version. Dinklage, who has a large fierce face and brooding eyes, stands four feet five inches tall. While it is easier for him to embody the warped shadow of Richard, his challenge is to give similar reality to the texture and charm of his character's percolating hatred. Although he radiates intelligence, Dinklage seems unable to deliver a nuanced sense of Richard's infantile wish to spoil—a fury that has its root in the envy that Richard admits at the opening. "Since I cannot prove a lover / To entertain these fair well-spoken days," he says, "I am determined to prove a villain / And hate the idle pleasures of these days." Instead of parsing Richard's vindictive rage, Dinklage, who has a booming voice, too often merely declaims it.

"I don't think he's ever been hugged," Dinklage said recently of his character, and Shakespeare allows for this psychological point. The icy Duchess of York (Roberta Maxwell) demonstrates that her hateful son was the product of a toxic maternal love. "A grievous burden was thy birth to me," she tells him. "Tetchy and wayward was thy infancy; / Thy schooldays frightful, desp'rate, wild and furious . . . / What comfortable hour canst thou name / That ever graced me with thy company?" But Richard is much more than a case study in bad nurturing. Although he brags that he seems "a saint, when most I play the devil," his monstrousness does not go unremarked by the court. By his own admission, he wants to "see my shadow as I pass," and, in a way, the vitriol levelled at him—which he receives with such bemused equanimity—is the shadow of his brilliant destructiveness projected into others. Lady Anne (Kali Rocha) spits at him; Queen Margaret (Isa Thomas) rains curses on his head. He is variously described as "a bottled spider," an "abortive rooting hog," a "son of hell," and a dog "that had his teeth before his eyes." But, to a man whose deformity could cause him to be easily overlooked, the venom of others is perversely comforting. It insures that he is seen and, more important, remembered.

The word "monster" has its etymology, paradoxically, in the Latin word for "warning" and "wonder." The trail of blood that Richard leaves in his ascent to the throne—he dispatches nine potential challengers to his kingship in the course of the evening—makes that warning sensational. But where is the wonder? It seems, for Shakespeare, to lie in the power of Richard's penetrating intelligence and in his audacious fluency—which enables him, for instance, to disarm Lady Anne of her hatred

PHOTOGRAPH BY RICHARD AVEDON

Peter Dinklage embodies the warped shadow of Richard III.



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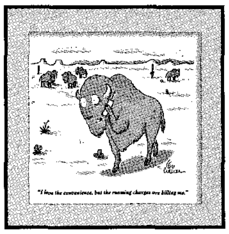
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and marry her. At the end of the play, just before Richard is killed in battle, a nightmare moves him to reconsider his life and to acknowledge his own profound emptiness. He makes mayhem, it becomes clear, instead of attacking the mayhem within himself. In this last brilliant passage, he acts out the internal battle of his self-loathing psyche:

> Richard loves Richard: that is, I and I.
> Is there a murderer here? No. Yes, I am.
> Then fly. What, from myself? Great reason why—
> Lest I revenge. What, myself upon myself?
> Alack, I love myself. Wherefore? For any good
> That I myself have done unto myself?
> O no, alas, I rather hate myself.

In its hubbub, the production at the Public blurs this psychological subtlety. DuBois seems to specialize in broad strokes; things are done more for effect than for insight, and Dinklage is sometimes played for cheap laughs. When he becomes king, he is forced to clamber awkwardly onto the throne. Later, in the best stage picture of the evening, Dinklage has no trouble getting up onto a long table and striding its length to kick papers into the lap of Lord Hastings (Stephen Barker Turner) and then order his head chopped off. When Hastings's head does roll, it's produced in a bloody sack, which gets a ghoulish laugh when Richard puts a helmet on it. But DuBois's indulgence spoils the moment; he double-dips on the joke by having an actor toss the sack over his shoulder as he exits. For a real Grand Guignol frisson, the head should hit the floor with a thump, but, like everything else in this production, it has no real weight.

In Craig Lucas's "Reckless" (revived by the Manhattan Theatre Club at the Biltmore, under the slick direction of Mark Brokaw), the central metaphor is not blood but snow: an emblem, if we needed another, of America's dream of purity and abundance, which the quirky, deeply detached heroine of the play, Rachel (Mary-Louise Parker), invokes as the curtain rises. It is Christmas Eve, and as she stares out at the New England-like village beyond her window, kvelling about the perfection of the winter scene, her mournful husband (Thomas Sadoski) bursts into tears and admits that he has taken out a contract on her life. Unless she does something to escape, in five minutes she'll be toast. Abandoning her two young sons, and dressed only in pink slippers and a nightgown, she climbs out of the snow-silted window and into a new life. Both she and the play go in search of a reason to exist.

Rachel is the female equivalent of those sleepwalkers who populate a lot of American comedy: innocents who run the gantlet of a faithless world, only to emerge more or less intact. In the role, Parker walks a tightrope between vacancy and vision; she's an expert comic player who is able to convey both wonder and sweetness in her bewilderment, giving credibility to the preposterous circumstances in which she finds herself. In this picaresque allegory of American pragmatism, each character is turned into a sort of fraud in order to meet his own needs—even Rachel, who lies about her marital status to get on a quiz show, where she wins a hundred thousand dollars to give to the man who rescued her. The man, however, is not what he seems: he has abandoned his first family; his deaf-mute paraplegic wife is faking her silence in order to hold on to his love. And so it goes: a parade of betrayals that keep Rachel on a nightmarish treadmill, running and running and getting nowhere.

Ultimately, this kind of narrative structure becomes boring. Although Lucas's absurdities have a well-written charm, the surprise emerges from the playwright's manipulations, not from the characters' revelations. And, this being a commercial entertainment, the reckless anarchy of life is given a final, pleasing fairy-tale symmetry: Rachel gets her happy ending, which in this case is both an understanding of her own suffering and a respite from it. She ends up in snowbound Alaska, working as a therapist, and repairing the wounds of a young man who turns out to be her now adult son. On the night I saw "Reckless," the audience applauded warmly but didn't stand. I guess if you'll stand for that, you'll stand for anything. ♦

CONSTABULARY NOTES FROM ALL OVER

From the Tampa (Fla.) Tribune.

A Port Charlotte woman hit an alligator in her Honda Accord and tried to save it. But she crashed when the 6-foot reptile began to thrash around in the back seat. She was charged with possession of an alligator, a felony in Florida.

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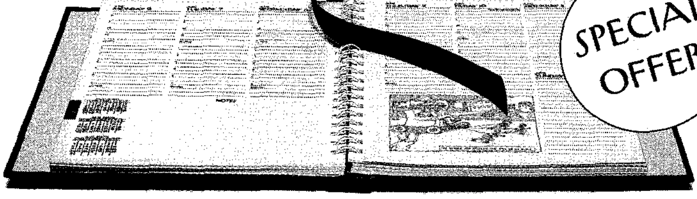

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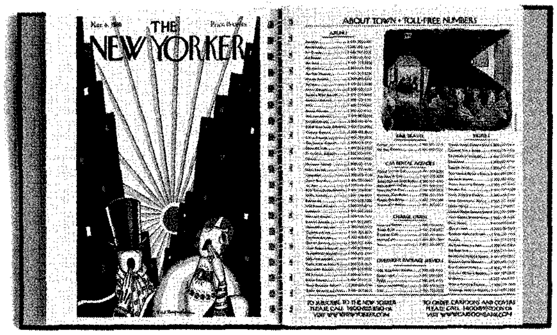
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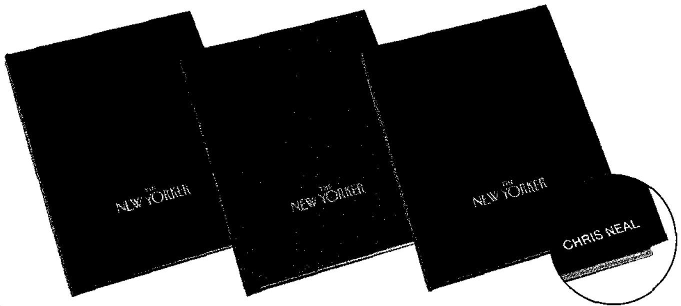
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How to think about prescription drugs.

BY MALCOLM GLADWELL

Ten years ago, the multinational pharmaceutical company AstraZeneca launched what was known inside the company as the Shark Fin Project. The team for the project was composed of lawyers, marketers, and scientists, and its focus was a prescription drug known as Prilosec, a heartburn medication that, in one five-year stretch of its extraordinary history, earned AstraZeneca twenty-six billion dollars. The patent on the drug was due to expire in April of 2001. The name Shark Fin was a reference to what Prilosec sales—and AstraZeneca's profits—would look like if nothing was done to fend off the ensuing low-priced generic competition.

The Shark Fin team drew up a list of fifty options. One idea was to devise a Prilosec 2.0—a version that worked faster or longer, or was more effective. Another idea was to combine it with a different heartburn remedy, or to change the formulation, so that it came in a liquid gel or in an extended-release form. In the end, AstraZeneca decided on a subtle piece of chemical reëngineering. Prilosec, like many drugs, is composed of two "isomers"—a left-hand and a right-hand version of the molecule. In some cases, removing one of the isomers can reduce side effects or make a drug work a little bit better, and in all cases the Patent Office recognizes something with one isomer as a separate invention from something with two. So AstraZeneca cut Prilosec in half.

AstraZeneca then had to prove that the single-isomer version of the drug was better than regular Prilosec. It chose as its target something called erosive esophagitis, a condition in which stomach acid begins to bubble up and harm the lining of the esophagus. In one study, half the patients took Prilosec, and half took Son of Prilosec. After one month, the two drugs were dead even. But after two months, to the delight of the Shark Fin team, the single-isomer version edged ahead—with a ninety-per-cent healing rate versus Prilosec's eighty-seven per cent. The new drug was called Nexium. A patent was filed, the F.D.A. gave its blessing, and, in March of 2001, Nexium hit the pharmacy shelves priced at a hundred and twenty dollars for a month's worth of pills. To keep cheaper generics at bay, and persuade patients and doctors to think of Nexium as state of the art, AstraZeneca spent half a billion dollars in marketing and advertising in the year following the launch. It is now one of the half-dozen top-selling drugs in America.

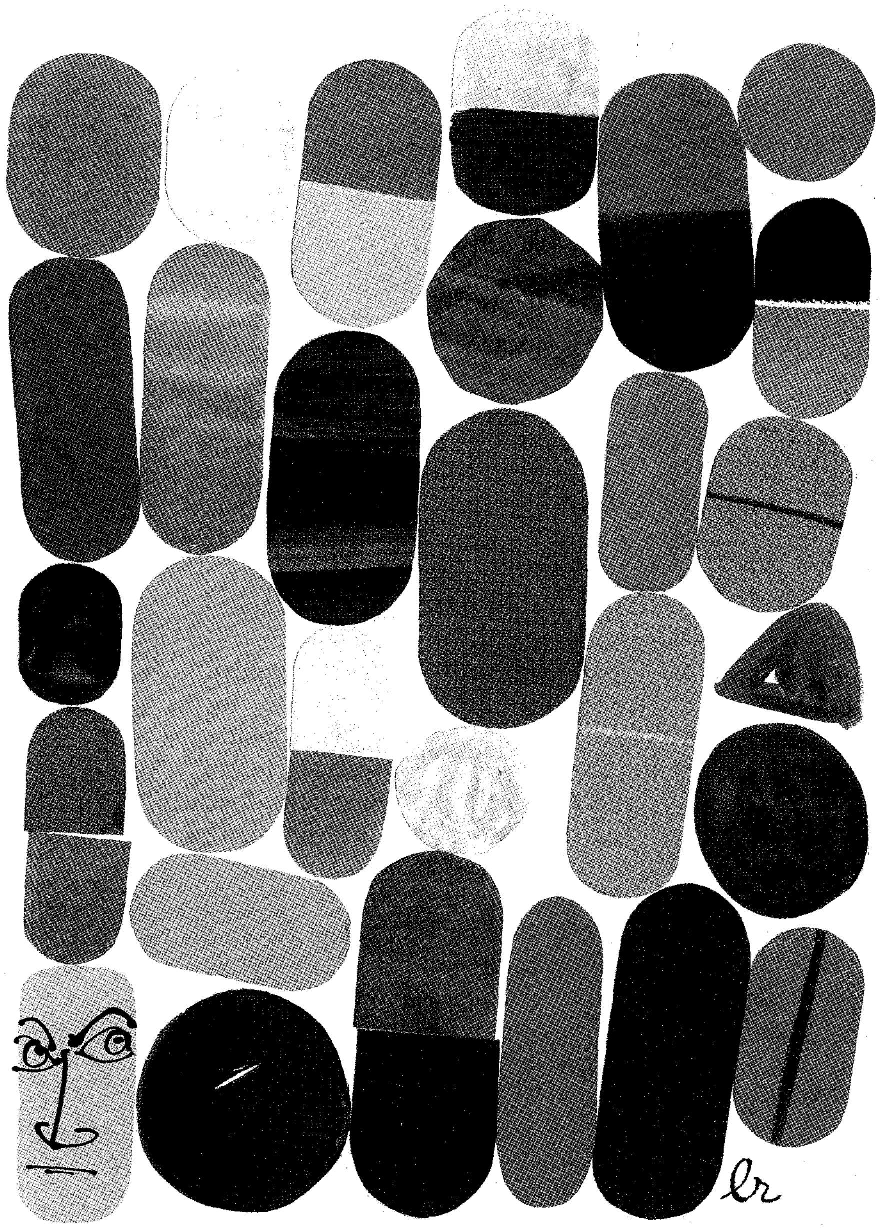
In the political uproar over prescription-drug costs, Nexium has become a symbol of everything that is wrong with the pharmaceutical industry. The big drug companies justify the high prices they charge—and the extraordinary profits they enjoy—by arguing that the search for innovative, life-saving medicines is risky and expensive. But Nexium is little more than a repackaged version of an old medicine. And the hundred and twenty dollars a month that AstraZeneca charges isn't to recoup the costs of risky research and development; the costs were for a series of clinical trials that told us nothing we needed to know, and a half-billion-dollar marketing campaign selling the solution to a problem we'd already solved. "The Prilosec pattern, repeated across the pharmaceutical industry, goes a long way to explain why the nation's prescription drug bill is rising an estimated 17 % a year even as general inflation is quiescent," the *Wall Street Journal* concluded, in a front-page article that first revealed the Shark Fin Project.

In "The Truth About the Drug Companies: How They Deceive Us and What to Do About It" (Random House; $24.95), Marcia Angell offers an even harsher assessment. Angell used to be the editor-in-chief of *The New England Journal of Medicine*, which is among the most powerful positions in American medicine, and in her view drug companies are troubled and corrupt. She thinks that they charge too much, engage in deceptive research, produce inferior products, borrow their best ideas from government-funded scientists, and buy the affections of physicians with trips and gifts. To her, the story of Nexium and drugs like it is proof that the pharmaceutical industry is "now primarily a marketing machine to sell drugs of dubious benefit."

Of course, it is also the case that Nexium is a prescription drug: every person who takes Nexium was given the drug with the approval of a doctor—and doctors are professionals who ought to know that there are many cheaper ways to treat heartburn. If the patient was coming in for the first time, the doctor could have prescribed what's known as an H2 antagonist, such as a generic version of Tagamet (cimetidine), which works perfectly well for many people and costs only about twenty-eight dollars a month. If the patient wasn't responding to Tagamet, the doctor could have put him on the cheaper, generic form of Prilosec, omeprazole.

The patient's insurance company could easily have stepped in as well. It could have picked up the tab for Nexium only if the patient had first tried generic Tagamet. Or it could have discouraged Nexium use, by requiring anyone who wanted the drug to pay the difference between it and generic omeprazole. Both the physician and the insurance company, meanwhile, could have sent the patient to any drugstore in America, where he or she would have found, next to the Maalox and the Pepcid, a package of over-the-counter Prilosec. O.T.C. Prilosec is identical to prescription Prilosec and effectively equivalent to prescription Nexium, and it costs only twenty dollars a month.

Throughout the current debate over prescription-drug costs—as seniors have gone on drug-buying bus trips to Canada, as state Medicaid programs and employers have become increasingly angry over rising health-care costs, and as John Kerry has made reining in the pharmaceutical industry a central theme of his Presidential campaign—the common assumption has been that the rise of drugs like Nexium is entirely the fault of the pharmaceutical industry. Is it? If doctors routinely prescribe drugs like



It's not that we're paying more for drugs; it's that more people are taking more of them.

LAURIE ROSENWALD

Nexium and insurers routinely pay for them, after all, there is surely more than one culprit in the prescription-drug mess.

The problem with the way we think about prescription drugs begins with a basic misunderstanding about drug prices. The editorial board of the *Times* has pronounced them much too high; Marcia Angell calls them "intolerable." The perception that the drug industry is profiteering at the expense of the American consumer has given pharmaceutical firms a reputation on a par with that of cigarette manufacturers.

In fact, the complaint is only half true. The "intolerable" prices that Angell writes about are confined to the brand-name sector of the American drug marketplace. As the economists Patricia Danzon and Michael Furukawa recently pointed out in the journal *Health Affairs,* drugs still under patent protection are anywhere from twenty-five to forty per cent more expensive in the United States than in places like England, France, and Canada. Generic drugs are another story. Because there are so many companies in the United States that step in to make drugs once their patents expire, and because the price competition among those firms is so fierce, generic drugs here are among the cheapest in the world. And, according to Danzon and Furukawa's analysis, when prescription drugs are converted to over-the-counter status no other country even comes close to having prices as low as the United States.

It is not accurate to say, then, that the United States has higher prescription-drug prices than other countries. It is accurate to say only that the United States has a different pricing system from that of other countries. Americans pay more for drugs when they first come out and less as the drugs get older, while the rest of the world pays less in the beginning and more later. Whose pricing system is cheaper? It depends. If you are taking Mevacor for your cholesterol, the 20-mg. pill is two-twenty-five in America and less than two dollars if you buy it in Canada. But generic Mevacor (lovastatin) is about a dollar a pill in Canada and as low as sixty-five cents a pill in the United States. Of course, not every drug comes in a generic version. But so many important drugs have gone off-patent recently that the rate of increase in drug spending in the United States has fallen sharply for the past four years. And so many other drugs are going to go off-patent in the next few years—including the top-selling drug in this country, the anti-cholesterol medication Lipitor—that many Americans who now pay more for their drugs than their counterparts in other Western countries could soon be paying less.

The second misconception about prices has to do with their importance in driving up over-all drug costs. In one three-year period in the mid-nineteen-nineties, for example, the amount of money spent in the United States on asthma medication increased by almost a hundred per cent. But none of that was due to an increase in the price of asthma drugs. It was largely the result of an increase in the *prevalence* of usage—that is, in the number of people who were given a diagnosis of the disease and who then bought drugs to treat it. Part of that hundred-per-cent increase was also the result of a change in what's known as the *intensity* of drug use: in the mid-nineties, doctors were becoming far more aggressive in their attempts to prevent asthma attacks, and in those three years people with asthma went from filling about nine prescriptions a year to filling fourteen prescriptions a year. Last year, asthma costs jumped again, by twenty-six per cent, and price inflation played a role. But, once again, the big factor was prevalence. And this time around there was also a change in what's called the therapeutic mix; in an attempt to fight the disease more effectively, physicians are switching many of their patients to newer, better, and more expensive drugs, like Merck's Singulair.

Asthma is not an isolated case. In 2003, the amount that Americans spent on cholesterol-lowering drugs rose 23.8 per cent, and similar increases are forecast for the next few years. Why the increase? Well, the baby boomers are aging, and so are at greater risk for heart attacks. The incidence of obesity is increasing. In 2002, the National Institutes of Health lowered the thresholds for when people with high cholesterol ought to start taking drugs like Lipitor and Mevacor. In combination, those factors are having an enormous impact on both the prevalence and the intensity of cholesterol treatment. All told, prescription-drug spending in the United States rose 9.1 per cent last year. Only three of those percentage points were due to price increases, however, which means that inflation was about the same in the drug sector as it was in the over-all economy. Angell's book and almost every other account of the prescription-drug crisis take it for granted that cost increases are evidence of how we've been cheated by the industry. In fact, drug expenditures are rising rapidly in the United States not so much because we're being charged more for prescription drugs but because more people are taking more medications in more expensive combinations. It's not price that matters; it's volume.

TRANSGRESSIONS

He thinks about how important the sinning was,
how much his equity was in simply being alive.
Like the sloth. The days and nights wasted,
doing nothing important adding up to
the favorite years. Long hot afternoons
watching ants while the cicadas railed
in the Chinese elm about the brevity of life.
Indolence so often when no one was watching.
Wasting June mornings with the earth singing
all around. Autumn afternoons doing nothing
but listening to the siren voices of streams
and clouds coaxing him into the sweet happiness
of leaving all of it alone. Using up what
little time we have, relishing our mortality,
waltzing slowly without purpose. Neglecting
the future. Content to let the garden fail
and the house continue on in its usual disorder.
Yes, and coveting his neighbors' wives.
Their clean hair and soft voices. The seraphim
he was sure were in one of the upstairs rooms.
Hesitant occasions of pride, feeling himself feeling.
Waking in the night and lying there. Discovering
the past in the wonderful stillness. The other,
older pride. Watching the ambulance take away
the man whose throat he had crushed. Above all,
his greed. Greed of time, of being. This world,
the pinewoods stretching all brown or bare
on either side of the railroad tracks in the winter
twilight. Him feeling the cold, sinfully unshriven.

—*Jack Gilbert*

This is a critical fact, and it ought to fundamentally change the way we think about the problem of drug costs. Last year, hospital expenditures rose by the same amount as drug expenditures—nine per cent. Yet almost all of that (eight percentage points) was due to inflation. That's something to be upset about: when it comes to hospital services, we're spending more and getting less. When it comes to drugs, though, we're spending more and we're getting more, and that makes the question of how we ought to respond to rising drug costs a little more ambiguous.

Take CareSource, a nonprofit group that administers Medicaid for close to four hundred thousand patients in Ohio and Michigan. CareSource runs a tightly managed pharmacy program and substitutes generics for brand-name drugs whenever possible. Nonetheless, the group's pharmacy managers are forecasting at least ten-per-cent increases in their prescription-drug spending in the upcoming year. The voters of Ohio and Michigan can hardly be happy with that news. Then again, it's not as if that money were being wasted.

The drug that CareSource spends more money on than any other is Singulair, Merck's new asthma pill. That's because Medicaid covers a lot of young, lower-income families, where asthma is epidemic and Singulair is a highly effective drug. Isn't the point of having a Medicaid program to give the poor and the ailing a chance to live a healthy life? This year, too, the number of patients covered by CareSource who are either blind or disabled or have received a diagnosis of AIDS grew from fifteen to eighteen per cent. The treatment of AIDS is one of the pharmaceutical industry's great success stories: drugs are now available that can turn what was once a death sentence into a manageable chronic disease. The evidence suggests, furthermore, that aggressively treating diseases like AIDS and asthma saves money in the long term by preventing far more expensive hospital visits. But there is no way to treat these diseases in the short term—and make sick people healthy—without spending more on drugs.

The economist J. D. Klienke points out that if all physicians followed the treatment guidelines laid down by the National Institutes of Health the number of Americans being treated for hypertension would rise from twenty million to forty-three million, the use of asthma medication would increase somewhere between twofold and tenfold, and the number of Americans on one of the so-called "statin" class of cholesterol-lowering medications would increase by at least a factor of ten. By these measures, it doesn't seem that we are spending too much on prescription drugs. If the federal government's own medical researchers are to be believed, we're spending too little.

The fact that volume matters more than price also means that the emphasis of the prescription-drug debate is all wrong. We've been focussed on the drug manufacturers. But decisions about prevalence, therapeutic mix, and intensity aren't made by the producers of drugs. They're made by the consumers of drugs.

This is why increasing numbers of employers have in recent years made use of what are known as Pharmacy Benefit Managers, or P.B.M.s. The P.B.M.s draw up drug formularies—lists of preferred medications. They analyze clinical-trials data to find out which drugs are the most cost-effective. In a category in which there are many equivalent options, they bargain with drug firms, offering to deliver all their business to one company in exchange for a discount. They build incentives into prescription-drug plans to encourage intelligent patient behavior. If someone wants to take a brand-name oral contraceptive and there is a generic equivalent available, for example, a P.B.M. might require her to pay the price difference. In the case of something like heartburn, the P.B.M. might require patients to follow what's called step therapy—to try the cheaper H2 antagonists first, and only if that fails to move to a proton-pump inhibitor like omeprazole. Employers who used two or more of these strategies last year saw a decrease of almost five per cent in their pharmacy spending.

There is no mention of these successes in "The Truth About the Drug Companies." Though much of the book is concerned with the problem of such costs, P.B.M.s, the principal tool that private health-care plans use to control rising drug costs, are dismissed in a few paragraphs. Angell's focus, instead, is on the behavior of the pharmaceutical industry. An entire chapter, for instance, centers on the fact that the majority of drugs produced by the pharmaceutical industry are either minor variations or duplicates of drugs already on the market. Merck pioneered the statin category with Mevacor. Now we have Pfizer's Lipitor, Bristol-Myers Squibb's Pravachol, Novartis's Lescol, AstraZeneca's Crestor, and Merck's second entrant, Zocor—all of which do pretty much the same thing. Angell thinks that these "me-too" drugs are a waste of time and money, and that the industry should devote its resources to the development of truly innovative drugs instead. In one sense, she's right: we need a cure for Alzheimer's much more than we need a fourth or fifth statin. Yet me-too drugs are what drive prices down. The presence of more than one drug in a given category gives P.B.M.s their leverage when it comes time to bargain with pharmaceutical companies.

With the passage of the Medicare prescription-drug-insurance legislation, late last year, the competition created by me-toos has become even more important. The bill gives responsibility for managing the drug benefit to P.B.M.s. In each therapeutic category, Medicare will set guidelines for how many and what kinds of drugs the P.B.M.s will have to include, and then the P.B.M.s will negotiate directly with drug companies for lower prices. Some analysts predict that, as long as Medicare is smart about how it defines the terms of the benefit, the discounts—particularly in crowded therapeutic categories like the statins—could be considerable. Angell appears to understand none of this. "Medicare will have to pay whatever drug companies charge," she writes, bafflingly, "and it will have to cover expensive me-too drugs as well as more cost-effective ones."

The core problem in bringing drug spending under control, in other words, is persuading the users and buyers and prescribers of drugs to behave rationally, and the reason we're in the mess we're in is that, so far, we simply haven't done a very good job of that. "The sensitivity on the part of employers is turned up pretty high on this," Robert Nease, who heads applied decision analysis for one of the nation's largest P.B.M.s, the St. Louis-based Express Scripts, says. "This is not an issue about how to cut costs without affecting quality. We know how to do that. We know that generics work as well as brands. We know that there are proven step therapies. The problem is that we haven't communicated to members that we aren't cheating them."

Among the costliest drug categories, for instance, is the new class of anti-inflammatory drugs known as COX-2 inhibitors. The leading brand, Celebrex, has been heavily advertised, and many patients suffering from arthritis or similar conditions ask for Celebrex when they see their physician, believing that a COX-2 inhibitor is a superior alternative to the previous generation of nonsteroidal anti-inflammatories (known as NSAIDs), such as ibuprofen. (The second leading COX-2 inhibitor, Merck's Vioxx, has just been taken off the market because of links to an elevated risk of heart attacks and strokes.) The clinical evidence, however, suggests that the COX-2s aren't any better at relieving pain than the NSAIDs. It's just that in a very select group of patients they have a lower risk of side effects like ulcers or bleeding.

"There are patients at high risk—people who have or have had an ulcer in the past, who are on blood-thinning medication, or who are of an advanced age," Nease says. "That specific group you would likely start immediately on a COX-2." Anyone else, he says, should really be started on a generic NSAID first. "The savings here are enormous," he went on. "The COX-2s are between a hundred and two hundred dollars a month, and the generic NSAIDs are pennies a day—and these are drugs that people take day in, day out, for years and years." But that kind of change can't be implemented unilaterally: the health plan and the employer have to explain to employees that in their case a brand-new, hundred-dollar drug may not be any better than an old, one-dollar drug.

Similarly, a P.B.M. might choose to favor one of the six available statins on its formulary—say, AstraZeneca's Crestor—because AstraZeneca gave it the biggest discount. But that requires, once again, a conversation between the health plan and the employee: the person who has happily been taking Pfizer's anti-cholesterol drug Lipitor for several years has to be convinced that Crestor is just as good, and the plan has to be very sure that Crestor *is* just as good.

The same debates are going on right now in Washington, as the Medicare program decides how to implement the new

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drug benefit. In practice, the P.B.M.s will be required to carry a choice of drugs in every therapeutic category. But how do you define a therapeutic category? Are drugs like Nexium and Prilosec and Prevacid—all technically known as proton-pump inhibitors—in one category, and the H2 antagonists in another? Or are they all in one big category? The first approach maximizes the choices available. The second approach maximizes the bargaining power of P.B.M.s. Deciding which option to take will have a big impact on how much we end up paying for prescription drugs—and it's a decision that has nothing to do with the drug companies. It's up to us; it requires physicians, insurers, patients, and government officials to reach some kind of consensus about what we want from our medical system, and how much we are willing to pay for it. AstraZeneca was able to do some chemical sleight of hand, spend half a billion on advertising, and get away with the "reinvention" of its heartburn drug only because that consensus hasn't yet been reached. For sellers to behave responsibly, buyers must first behave intelligently. And if we want to create a system where millions of working and elderly Americans don't have to struggle to pay for prescription drugs that's also up to us. We could find it in our hearts to provide all Americans with adequate health insurance. It is only by the most spectacular feat of cynicism that our political system's moral negligence has become the fault of the pharmaceutical industry.

There is a second book out this fall on the prescription-drug crisis, called "Overdosed America" (HarperCollins; $24.95), by John Abramson, who teaches at Harvard Medical School. At one point, Abramson discusses a study that he found in a medical journal concluding that the statin Pravachol lowered the risk of stroke in patients with coronary heart disease by nineteen per cent. That sounds like a significant finding, but, as Abramson shows, it isn't. In the six years of the study, 4.5 per cent of those taking a placebo had a stroke versus 3.7 per cent of those on Pravachol. In the real world, that means that for every thousand people you put on Pravachol you prevent one stroke—which, given how much the drug costs, comes to at least $1.2 million per stroke prevented. On top of that, the study's participants had an average age of sixty-two and most of them were men. Stroke victims, however, are more likely to be female, and, on average, much older—and the patients older than seventy in the study who were taking Pravachol had *more* strokes than those who were on a placebo.

Here is a classic case of the kind of thing that bedevils the American health system—dubious findings that, without careful evaluation, have the potential to drive up costs. But whose fault is it? It's hard to blame Pravachol's manufacturer, Bristol-Myers Squibb. The study's principal objective was to look at Pravachol's effectiveness in fighting heart attacks; the company was simply using that patient population to make a secondary observation about strokes. In any case, Bristol-Myers didn't write up the results. A group of cardiologists from New Zealand and Australia did, and they hardly tried to hide Pravachol's shortcomings in women and older people. All those data are presented in a large chart on the study's third page. What's wrong is the context in which the study's findings are presented. The abstract at the beginning ought to have been rewritten. The conclusion needs a much clearer explanation of how the findings add to our understanding of stroke prevention. There is no accompanying commentary that points out the extreme cost-ineffectiveness of Pravachol as a stroke medication—and all those are faults of the medical journal's editorial staff. In the end, the fight to keep drug spending under control is principally a matter of information, of proper communication among everyone who prescribes and pays for and ultimately uses drugs about what works and what doesn't, and what makes economic sense and what doesn't—and medical journals play a critical role in this process. As Abramson writes:

> When I finished analyzing the article and understood that the title didn't tell the whole story, that the findings were not statistically significant, and that Pravachol appeared to cause *more* strokes in the population at greater risk, it felt like a violation of the trust that doctors (including me) place in the research published in respected medical journals.

The journal in which the Pravachol article appeared, incidentally, was *The New England Journal of Medicine*. And its editor at the time the paper was accepted for publication? Dr. Marcia Angell. Physician, heal thyself. ♦

BRIEFLY NOTED

Chronicles: Volume One, *by Bob Dylan (Simon & Schuster; $24).* If "What is Bob thinking?" is the catechism of Bob Dylan fanatics, this first installment of his memoirs is a kind of Holy Grail—Dylan telling us what he thinks he thought while he did what he did. The book starts in 1961, with Dylan's arrival in New York, "a city like a web too intricate to understand and I wasn't going to try." When John Hammond signs Dylan, he is "in a state of unstable equilibrium, but you wouldn't have known it." This inscrutability typifies Dylan and turned pop music as much into a game of concealment as a crowd-pleasing celebration. Even when Dylan divulges his thoughts, he remains terse. Hearing Ricky Nelson on the radio, he knocks Nelson's "bleached out lyrics" but confesses that he and Nelson "have a lot in common." Then comes a sentence that a lesser writer would have embellished: "Ricky's song ended and I gave the rest of my French fries to Tiny Tim."

They Made America, *by Harold Evans (Little, Brown; $40).* In his second large-format book about U.S. history, Evans extolls American moxie, that seemingly native mixture of initiative and luck that produced the Colt revolver, the FM radio, the Kodak camera, Mickey Mouse, and eBay. As a historian, Evans is less concerned with the inventive spark itself than with how it finds capital and markets. This approach allows fresh insights into familiar stories; we know that the Wright brothers flew, but not, perhaps, how they flirted with the French before selling their machine to the U.S. government. Evans favors "democratizers" who generated affordable mass culture; Henry Ford is his paragon. In the current era, he focusses on the ferment of Silicon Valley, as embodied by such innovators as Larry Page, the Google co-founder, who marvels that more people don't work in technology, because "that's the easiest way to change the world."

The In-Between World of Vikram Lall, *by M. G. Vassanji (Knopf; $25).* In this novel set among Kenya's Indian diaspora, two ill-fated loves—Vikram Lall's for a young English girl, his sister's for a young African man—symbolize their family's tenuous social position as neither privileged oppressor nor righteous oppressed. Vikram, now in exile in Canada, recounts Kenya's painful process of decolonization and his own role laundering money for government officials, an activity that he justifies as the survival tactic of one considered "inherently disloyal" because of his race. Vikram's chilly amorality pervades this tautly written novel somewhat to its detriment. Although the narrative builds to the thawing of Vikram's frozen conscience, his professions of remorse are pro forma, and his return to Kenya in search of redemption feels forced. Still, the book admirably captures the tenor of the postcolonial period: the predicament of the Asian minority, the corruption that marred Kenya's fledgling independence, and the individual tragedies that were the cost of revolution.

Cheat and Charmer, *by Elizabeth Frank (Random House; $25.95).* Set in postwar Hollywood, Elizabeth Frank's first novel evokes a lost world of orange blossoms, pressed linens, and Friday-night luaus at which liveried waiters serve pineapple chunks and rumaki. It is to lay claim to such comforts that Dinah Milligan, a former chorus girl, marries a director of popular cornball comedies, and to preserve his career and the good life to which they've grown accustomed that she testifies before the HUAC. After naming names—including that of her sister—Dinah endures the further trials of ostracism and guilt. This leads her to probe, with keen moral intelligence, the forces that have led to her predicament—a pattern of desires that span continents, oceans, and kidney-shaped pools, and which have entangled the people she loves for most of an American century.

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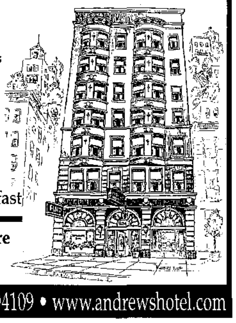

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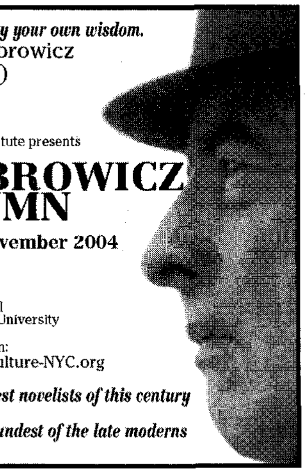

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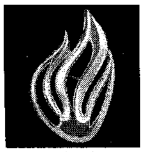

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MUSICAL EVENTS

TAYMOR'S MYTHOLOGY

A glorious "Magic Flute" at the Met.

BY ALEX ROSS

In the fall of 1791, Mozart was a sick man who felt his life slipping away. Still, he was intensely happy. The motive for his joy was "The Magic Flute," which had opened at the end of September, in Vienna. Representatives of the musical élite were hailing the opera as perhaps the richest of Mozart's career. Antonio Salieri told his sometime rival that it was "worthy of being played at the greatest festival for the greatest monarchs." Members of the brotherhood of Masons smiled among themselves as they recognized a kindred spirit at work: the tale of handsome young Tamino, who passes a series of tests set by the mysterious magus Sarastro, was both a parable and a parody of the rituals of Freemasonry. Yet "The Magic Flute" wasn't a proper opera at all; it was a *Singspiel*, a hybrid genre akin to musical theatre. The staging aimed to astonish the eyes: one visitor reported seeing "a thousand grotesque forms." Tickets cost between seven and seventeen kreuzer—about what you'd spend on a round of beers after the show. Mozart had made his imperial art democratic, and he exulted in the many-sidedness of his appeal. "What really makes me happy," he wrote to his wife, "is the *Silent applause!*—one can feel how this opera is rising and rising."

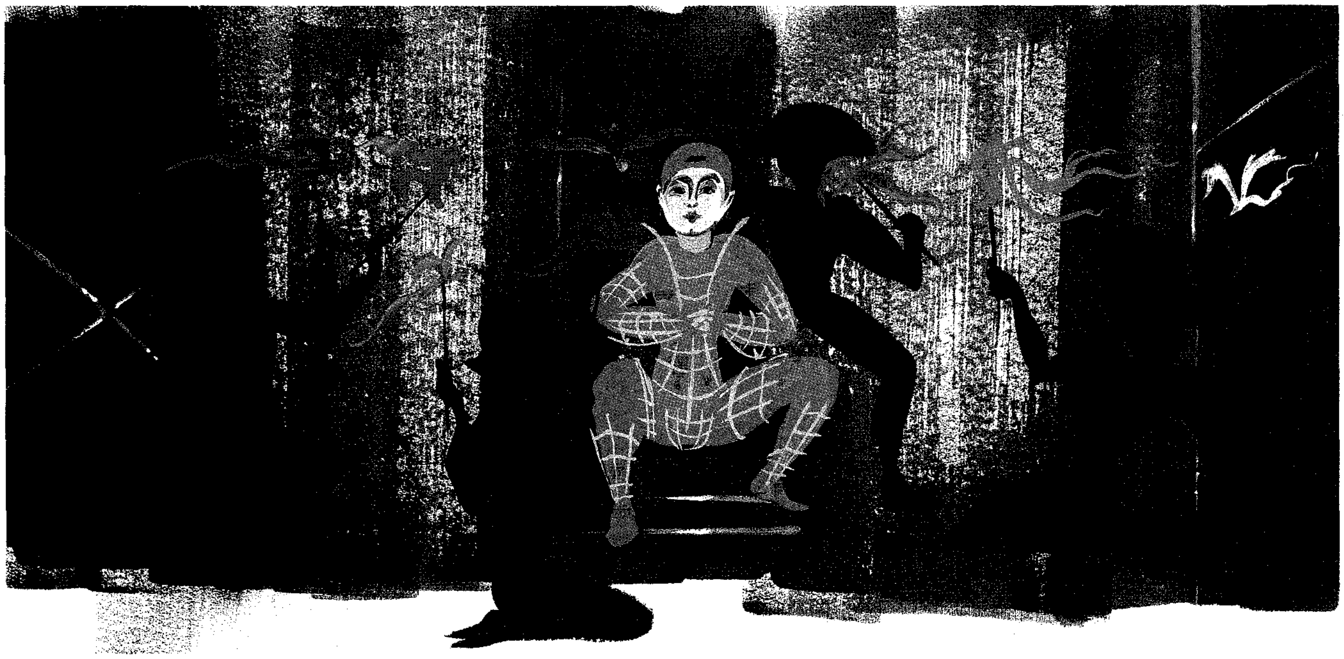
I reread stories of Mozart's last months just before seeing Julie Taymor's production of "The Magic Flute," at the Metropolitan Opera. They stayed with me as Taymor's deeply dazzling vision took hold. "Silent applause" is an apt phrase for what happens when a listener's inward experience locks in synch with the experience of several thousand others. It's the sense of a performance "rising and rising," as Mozart said; of a jaded, lonely crowd made to grin like kids; of a world gone right. I hung on to the feeling as long as I could.

"The Magic Flute" is half mystery play, half street comedy. Directors usually bend it in whatever direction their sensibility lies. Taymor, who first directed the opera back in 1993, well before she created her Broadway production of "The Lion King," does not try to resolve its tensions. Instead, she mobilizes every device in her repertoire to render with extreme vivacity whatever Mozart and his librettist, Emanuel Schikaneder, throw at her. To the usual Masonic symbology she adds motifs from the Kabbalah, Tantric Buddhism, Bunraku, Indonesian puppet theatre, and so on. The Met stage has never been so alive with movement, so charged with color, so brilliant to the eye. The outward effect is of a shimmering cultural kaleidoscope, with all manner of mystical and folk traditions blending together. Behind the surface lies a melancholy sense that history has never permitted such a synthesis—that Mozart's theme of love and power united is nothing more than a fever dream. But Taymor allows the Enlightenment fantasy to play out to the end.

Mystery sets the tone before comedy takes over. Forty-three triangles hang in a spooky, asymmetrical pattern on the stage curtain. James Levine's tempos have been exhilaratingly fleet of late, but I wish he'd lingered longer on the three majestic, light-dark chords that set the music in motion—E-flat major, C minor, E-flat in first inversion. They pose a question that the opera never quite answers. George Tsypin, who created sets for "War and Peace" at the Met two seasons ago, suspends Masonic and Kabbalistic emblems in towering Plexiglas façades, gateways, and columns. That these sets could serve as the backdrop for some very scary Vegas magic show—David Copperfield raising the dead, perhaps—is part of the whimsical appeal of the production, which stops well short of taking itself too seriously.

An incredible variety of figures and creatures swirl through Tsypin's hieroglyphic castles. Tamino and Sarastro both look like Japanese princes, while

Papageno, the bird-catcher well on his way to being a bird himself, has a street-wise look, wearing a green jumpsuit and a sporty beak cap. The Queen of the Night, who tries to lure Tamino from his appointed path, appears with huge moth wings fluttering behind her. Monostatos, Sarastro's wayward henchman, is a bit of a bat. What might have seemed arbitrary in another production here seems simply right, because Taymor controls each tableau with a painter's eye. Mark Dendy obtains some of the sharpest dancing I've seen on the Met stage; when Papageno immobilizes Monostatos's would-be tough guys with his magic bells, they become screamingly gay Broadway hoofers. Meanwhile, all manner of puppet beasts, including serpents, bears, and the entire contents of Papageno's birdcage, stream around the singers. The animals, created with the help of Michael Curry, become co-stars of the piece, not because they impart a "Lion King" glamour but because they move so buoyantly to the music. At times, the entire stage is dancing to Mozart's time.



Under Taymor's spell, the Met stage has never been so alive with movement, so charged with color, so brilliant to the eye.

RUBEN TOLEDO

Matthew Polenzani, a lyric tenor with a lovely, stately voice and a stiff stage presence, never looked altogether comfortable as Tamino. Dorothea Röschmann, as Pamina, relished the challenge, projecting a dusky gleam in her lower register that I don't remember hearing in her "Figaro" début last year. Ľubica Vargicová was dangerously hesitant in her opening aria, but she showed fire alongside the required coloratura precision in "Der Hölle Rache" later on. Kwangchul Youn was a noble Sarastro, although he lacked some strength at the bottom of his range. With no fewer than four singers performing in the house for the first time—Anna Christy did well as Papagena—this was a potentially nervous cast, but Levine kept them all on track and maintained a limpid tone from beginning to end.

One singer stood out from the others in his enthusiasm to embody Taymor's vision: twenty-six-year-old Rodion Pogossov, who until recently had been part of the Met's Young Artist program. He filled in on short notice for Matthias Goerne as Papageno, having never sung a major role at the Met or anywhere else. He has a mellifluous baritone voice and is a natural, extroverted performer. Basically, he rocks. In place of the cutesy clowning that star baritones often indulge in, he created an antic, athletic, sexy bird-man on the prowl. Perhaps the Old Guard disapproved when Papageno broke into a strutting, arm-swinging hip-hop dance, but it's about time the Met got some flava.

Two lessons emerge from the soon-to-be-legendary phenomenon of this "Magic Flute." One is that Taymor has a great future at the house. If I were Joseph Volpe—and, happily, I'm not—I would be stalking her with offers for future projects; at the top of the list would be Wagner's "Ring." The Met's eighteen-year-old "Ring," the "Walküre" installment of which is now playing in a wildly uneven, weirdly cast performance under Valery Gergiev, has tilted from the grand to the grim. Taymor, with her flair for myth, might produce a "Ring" for the ages.

The other lesson is more wistful. When I got home, I wanted to write, Gene Shalit style, "This Flute's a hoot! Run, don't walk!" But there was no point in telling anyone to go anywhere; only a few three-hundred-dollar tickets remained, and these were quickly sold. (There will be five more performances in April; tickets go on sale November 21st.) Whenever the Met stumbles onto something truly wonderful, such as this "Magic Flute," or "Salome" last season, those in the know snatch up all the tickets before those in the dark can get a taste of what opera can achieve. Such is the enigma of classical music; the better it is, the more inaccessible, until, in its most rarefied form, it hardly exists. Perhaps Mozart took joy in the triumph of "The Magic Flute" because it showed him a way out of that gleaming prison: he could see a real public at last. Then he wrote his Requiem and died. ♦

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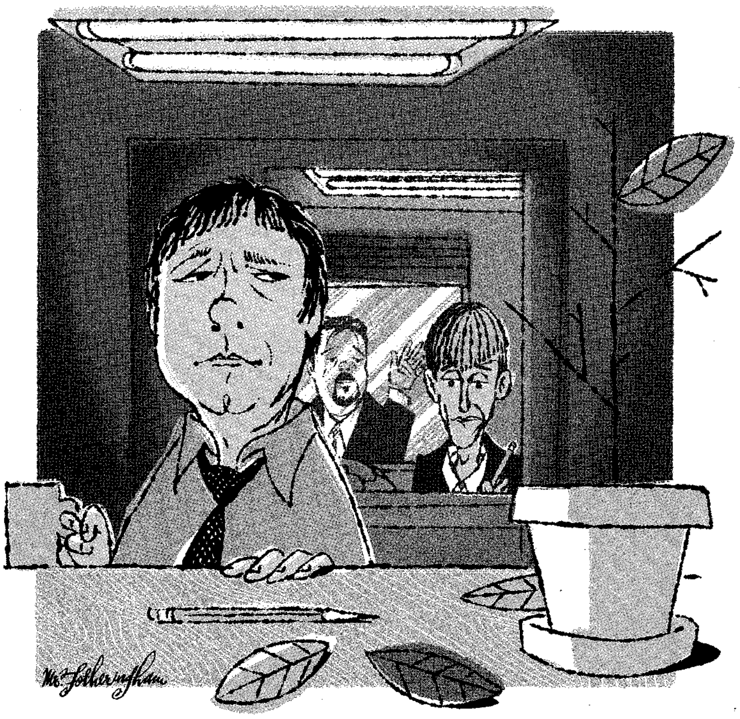
ON TELEVISION

PUSHING PAPER

Ricky Gervais does overtime at "The Office."

BY NANCY FRANKLIN



Going nowhere slowly: the deskbound workers on "The Office" define inertia.

Nobody who has seen the BBC series "The Office" has anything bad to say about it, and there's a reason for that: it's perfect. It's a comedy that doesn't make you laugh, and at times it is close to unbearable; some people like it so much that they can't watch it. That's how good it is. Created and directed by the writers Ricky Gervais and Stephen Merchant, "The Office," a pretend BBC documentary about a "typical workplace," captures, with awful brilliance, both the details of day-to-day office life and what the larger landscape of working life has come to look like over the past few decades, since words such as "redundancy" and "downsizing" and the even more chilling "rightsizing"—"right" according to whom?—have forced their way into our vocabulary. Gervais also stars as David Brent, an insecure, infantile office boss, who wants to be popular with his employees, and who says at various times that he thinks of himself as the head of a family, a "chilled-out" entertainer, a comedian, and, so magnanimous is he to his charges, a foreign-aid worker. David's delusions and his defensive behavior—he is acutely aware of the camera, and he goes through endless contortions to try to kick sand over the obvious self-interest behind his every decision and declaration—are the heart of the show (both the character and Gervais himself have become household names in Britain), but Gervais and Merchant, who once worked together in the office of a radio station, are generous in their writing, and several other characters are just as vivid. The series consists of only two seasons—twelve half-hour episodes in all—which aired here, on BBC America, in 2003 and are now available on DVD. Gervais and Merchant decided, even before they began filming the second season of their deskumentary, that it would be the last; they didn't want the quality to drop off. But they did leave their story open-ended enough to allow a return to it someday, and so it was that they came up with a Christmas special that aired in Britain last December and will be shown on BBC America later this week. (NBC, which failed miserably last year with a remake of the British show "Coupling," is, bless its heart, now remaking "The Office" for next year, with Steve Carell as the star.)

"The Office" is set at a branch of a paper company called Wernham Hogg, situated in the industrial town of Slough, west of London. What we see of Slough in the opening credits—and that's all we see of it, except for the parking lot and a local bar—is as dreary as the name promises: a leaden sky, a traffic roundabout, a bus station, an ugly office building. ("The Office" represents the second famous insult to Slough; the first was levelled in 1937 by John Betjeman, in a poem—called "Slough"—railing against rampant industrialization, whose opening lines invite destruction onto the town: "Come friendly bombs and fall on Slough! / It isn't fit for humans now, / There isn't grass to graze a cow. / Swarm over, Death!" David actually reads a bit of this to the camera, and then, dispensing some of the wisdom he believes he possesses in such quantity, he adds, "Right. I don't think you solve town-planning problems by dropping bombs all over the place. So he's embarrassed himself there.")

Inside the office, the atmosphere is no less dreary, despite the bright lighting: there's stained pinkish-gray carpeting and standard-issue file cabinets and desks set up in an open seating plan, with the occasional touch that David likes to think boosts morale, such as a toy monkey sitting on top of a coatrack and one of those singing-fish plaques (with dead batteries) on the wall. There's no soundtrack (or laugh track), so all we hear besides voices is the rustle of paper, the ringing of phones, and the low chattering of copiers and printers. When we're not in David's office listening to him talk about his management techniques and his philosophy of life, most of our time is spent around the adjoining desks of Gareth (Mackenzie Crook), an officious team leader who is territorial about his space, and Tim (Martin Freeman), an unambitious sales rep, who, partly out of boredom and partly because he likes to undermine Gareth's prissiness, embeds Gareth's stapler in Jell-O, and later drops it out the window. (At home, staplers are just staplers, but in the office they have a totemic power; if you want to rip someone's heart out, and remind him of his tenuous hold on his job, on his identity, on his very existence, just take his stapler. In the movie "Office Space," which has a similar setting, a worker whose many humiliations include the filching of his stapler gets his revenge by burning down the building.) Tim, the smartest person in the office, is also the most passive about his career—he talks about going back to university and becoming a psychologist, but he is thirty and still lives at home, and when he is at work he often simply stares into the middle distance. He's serious, but with drollery around the edges. Halfway into the first season, Tim makes a romantic faux pas when he asks Dawn (Lucy Davis), the receptionist, out for a drink, thinking, mistakenly, that she has broken up with her fiancé, and for most of the rest of the series he has to act cool, so that neither his co-workers nor the camera will pick up on his pain. Freeman doesn't do that much with his face, but there's a spark of life in Tim that comes from the friction of his awareness of his own paralysis rubbing up against his inability, or lack of desire, to do anything about it. (Tim bears some physical resemblance, as it happens, to the earnest rocker Nigel Tufnel, the character played by Christopher Guest in "This Is Spinal Tap," which Gervais has credited as his biggest influence in making "The Office.") And because Dawn does feel something for Tim and also can't show her feelings, the perforce small gestures and looks between them make it seem as though they were in their own private, silent movie.

The overarching drama in the Slough branch is that the company plans to create redundancies; David finds this out from his boss at the beginning of the first series, but instead of working to make his branch shine he spends his days making jokes and trying way too hard to get his employees to like him. He isn't the boss from hell; he's the boss from middle-management purgatory. He's not tyrannical, just puffed-up and ineffective, and none of his employees have enough gumption to quite hate him. They're almost zombie-like at times—David has a few moments of shtick that probably *would* make employees laugh, but these drones never respond. David, for better and mostly for worse, is the most spirited person in this Slough of Despond. Gervais draws on a battery of grins and feints and verbiage to convey his need to gain and maintain stature at every turn. You don't really want to be in the same room as David Brent, but at the same time you can't take your eyes off him.

The special that follows the series is a departure from the approach that the series itself took. The filmmakers have returned, three years later, to see what the denizens of the Slough branch are up to, and the resulting footage has a self-consciousness that is now a common feature of documentaries and where-are-they-now follow-ups to reality shows. In the series proper, the documentary technique didn't call attention to itself; in the special, Gervais and Merchant make fun of it. (We hear a Scottish interviewer asking solemn questions such as "Do you miss being in the office environment?") At the same time, they seem to have bowed under the pressure of the series' success and given viewers what they thought they wanted: happy endings. Before that, though, we see a lot of shots of David driving in his car and talking to the camera—naturally, he complains about the way he was depicted in the original fake documentary—and of Dawn sitting around in Florida with her fiancé. David, who is no longer at Wernham Hogg, has had a few minutes of minor celebrity—as "that awful boss"—and he makes embarrassing public appearances that end badly. If anything, David has become more full of himself over time: he has upgraded himself to "anecdotalist," and keeps dropping by his old office without noticing the lack of enthusiasm that greets him each time. He has also cut a pop single, and we see the whole video for it. (At two and a half minutes, it's a slog.) The special underscores, with a deliberate lack of subtlety and with a clear intent to be funny, the ponderousness that the documentary form is prone to, but that quality also occasionally infects the show itself. The special *is* funny, if in a less satisfying way than the series, and it would be churlish to deny happiness to characters who have come to seem real to us. Still, one can't help wishing that Gervais and Merchant had left well enough—great enough—alone. We needed a sequel to "The Office" as much as we need a sequel to "Pride and Prejudice." ◆

EDWIN FOTHERINGHAM

THE CURRENT CINEMA

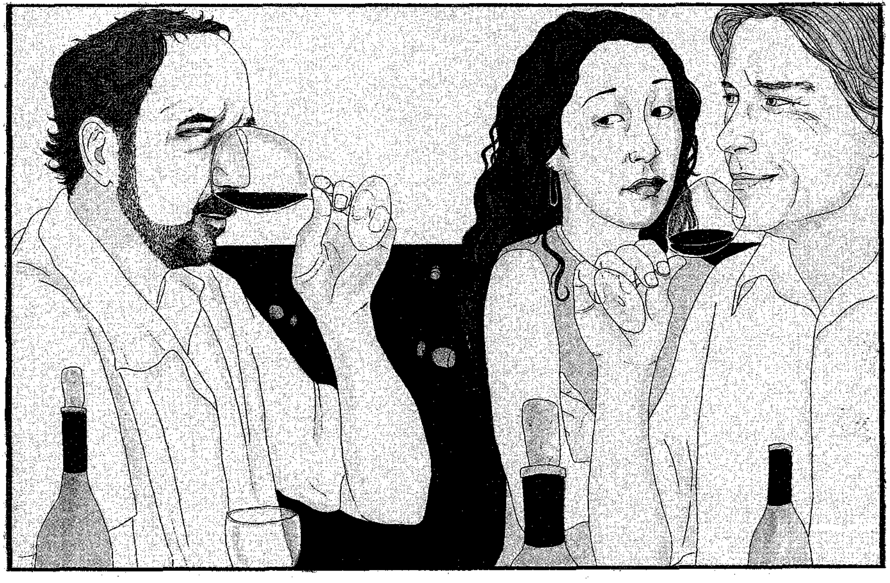
DRINKING AND DRIVING

Alexander Payne’s “Sideways.”

BY DAVID DENBY

Early on in the wonderful new movie “Sideways,” the hero, Miles (Paul Giamatti), does the *Times* crossword puzzle while driving his Saab on the San Diego Freeway. Sharp details are not enough in themselves to make a movie great; still, when Miles props his paper up on the steering wheel, it’s clear that the filmmakers—Alexander Payne, the director and screenwriter, and Jim Taylor, his co-writer—know what they are up to. Miles, a wine-loving failed novelist in his early forties, is, we quickly discover, the kind of guy who seizes every opportunity for trivial bravura (he does the crossword in ink). Two years earlier, his wife, who shared his love of wine (“the best palate of any woman I’ve known,” he says), left him flat; at the moment, his seven-hundred-and-fifty-page experimental novel (“It sort of devolves into a Robbe-Grillet thing”) is forlornly making its way around the New York publishing houses. He has no choice but to kill time. When his old college buddy Jack (Thomas Haden Church), a washed-up TV actor in Los Angeles, announces that he is finally getting married, the two set off for seven days of prenuptial wine-tasting and golf in the gold-and-green Santa Ynez Valley.

Miles is clearly a bibliophile, apparently a cinephile, and compulsively an oenophile; he likes to show off what he knows. At every stop, he tells Jack how to feel the “structure” of the grape, how to recognize “externals,” “good concentration,” and such flavors as asparagus and passion fruit; he instructs him to disdain the commonplace Merlot and to prize the delicate and cranky Pinot. Jack, however, couldn’t care less; he would happily drink rotgut, and he’ll sleep with any woman who comes along—he’s blissfully undiscriminating. A heavily muscled, good-looking lummox, with the kind of thick, brushed-back hair that only TV actors can manage to grow, Jack has a wide smile and a cornball line of patter with women that makes Miles cringe, in part because it works. Payne and Taylor, adapting a novel by Rex Pickett, let us know right away that Miles is furtive, duplicitous, and self-destructive, and that Jack gets laid a lot because it’s one thing he’s good at. At first, we wonder what holds these two together. “Sideways,” a comedy poised at the edge of despair, asks the question: How do you stop moving sideways? Or, more metaphorically: won’t a Cheval Blanc ’61, left too long on the shelf, lose its savor?



Paul Giamatti, Sandra Oh, and Thomas Haden Church in wine country.

LARA TOMLIN

Things happen on trips; that’s why the road-movie genre, with its radical concentration of means, never seems to tire. An opening to landscape, movement, adventure, and the eternal American desire to drop everything and light out for the territories, the form is both inherently dramatic and supremely flexible. It has served as the basis for crime thrillers (“They Live by Night,” “Bonnie and Clyde”), for violent explorations of the limits of freedom (“Easy Rider,” “Thelma & Louise”), for bruising tests of love and friendship (“Two for the Road,” “Scarecrow”). “Sideways” is one of the last: each man experiences the glories and the horrors of the other’s character and is forced, willy-nilly, to look himself in the face in a motel-room mirror.

Payne and Taylor have always made movies about the melancholy middling-to-lower range of achievement and ambition, the near-losers that Americans hate but that so many of us at our most demoralized become. Up until now, the dead-eyed blandness of Omaha, Payne’s home town, has dominated his work. He and Taylor have repeatedly satirized the emotional flatness and evasiveness of the place, while treating with tender respect their characters’ hesitant, inarticulate yearnings for something more. Together they have created a gallery of memorably mediocre people: the dumb, paint-sniffing but tenaciously enduring Ruth Stoops (Laura Dern) in “Citizen Ruth”; the vindictive schoolteacher (Matthew Broderick) in “Election”; the soured widower (Jack Nicholson) in “About Schmidt.” There is, I believe, a quiet but persistent spiritual ethos at the heart of their intention. The blinkered, semi-unconscious sinners stumble toward grace—a moment of clarity, of self-realization. Some of them may even get there.

Payne is a patient and orderly director; he wants character revelation and eruptive moments, and he carefully builds his scenes and gets both, but some of the elements in “Sideways” are no more than commonplace. The jazz score, by Rolfe Kent, plunks along uninterestingly, and when it accompanies the Saab zipping through loamy hills, or plays over a prolonged eating scene, the movie feels like an episode of "Great Getaways." Some of the camera setups are too obvious—the shots of faux-Tudor inns and luscious vineyards come off as conventionally handsome. Payne has finally got himself out of Nebraska—you can feel his limbs warming in the sunshiny beauty of California—but he hasn't come close to developing a visual style that can sweep the audience along. He never breaks free into anything like the startling, brutal lyricism of the French director Bertrand Blier, whose own two-men-on-the-road movies, "Going Places" (1974) and "Get Out Your Handkerchiefs" (1978), were exhilaratingly beautiful, amoral fantasies. Perhaps Payne, given his obsession with emotional inadequacy, can't abandon strict realism. Blier's heroes (Gérard Depardieu and Patrick Dewaere) were thoughtlessly carnal outlaws; Payne's are stunted men who need to grow up, and some of the tone of "Sideways" emerges from the American therapeutic instinct. Still, I fervently want Payne to lift off from the Omaha in his soul.

He's certainly ready. "Sideways" is his largest, most candid work. Miles and Jack have the scathing intimacy of friends who waded through each other's dirty laundry as freshmen, and the bluntness of their talk is raffishly enjoyable. The picture is leisurely in tempo but funny and intense, alternating between furious exchanges and stops to drink more wine. I can't think of another movie that has taken such sensual pleasure in the many forms of tippling (sipping, imbibing, downing, binging), and no one before Payne has thought of making amateur wine-tasting both a sublime ritual and a slightly ridiculous display: the firm, quick pour; the pause to swirl and sniff; the liquid held in the taster's mouth, followed by rhapsodies of praise or a rapid emission into the spit bucket. For the dissatisfied Miles, wine is both spirit and eros; he discovers in its velvety folds the happiness he gets cheated out of everywhere else. We notice immediately that he's diffuse and vague when he talks about his novel but precise, detailed, and ardent when he takes up his glass. On the road, as Jack presses for action, the men meet two vinously hip women: Maya (Virginia Madsen), a divorced graduate student who works as a waitress; and Stephanie (Sandra Oh), a sexy "pour girl" at one of the larger vineyards. Chattering about wine becomes a springboard into bed. Jack, only a few days before his wedding, begins carrying on with Stephanie; Miles and the blond, husky-voiced Maya, both of them taking their time (Miles is terrified), retreat to a quiet nook, where they earnestly discuss "the life of wine . . . the people who picked the grape." This could easily become embarrassing—parody is just a beat away—but we are held breathless by the way that Paul Giamatti suspends Miles between bitter shame and desire.

Giamatti has no chin to speak of, a round-shouldered physique, an adenoidal snarl, and the nervous grin of a craven dog. He's the national anti-ideal, and he's making a brilliant career out of it. In "American Splendor," as the cartoonist Harvey Pekar, he dragged his miseries around the deserted lots and slag heaps of Cleveland. Pekar is a genuine oddball but Miles is closer to common dreams and chagrins, and in this role Giamatti gives his bravest, most generously humane performance yet. Women may be repelled, but men will know this man, because, at one time or another, many of us have been this man. Miles demands an unlimited license to mock himself but is outraged if someone else slights him. When he talks about his beloved Pinot grape—it's thin-skinned, difficult to handle, but potentially sublime—he's talking about himself, of course, but we feel that he's posing, that he's extravagantly demanding of life so that he will always fail, and that he would rather fail than pull himself together and make the best of what he's got. His voice rising in pitch, his dark eyes bulging in rage (Miles's novel gets rejected), Giamatti is physically explosive in this movie—at one point, in an act of supreme self-loathing, he pours the spit bucket into his mouth and all over his body. The scene is Shakespearean in its emotional violence. When Giamatti goes over the top, he transcends Everyman shmuckiness and attains acting immortality.

As the week goes on, the adventures of the two men become more and more absurd and dangerous, and by the end of the movie we know what holds them together. Thomas Haden Church, from the NBC series "Wings," has been all too well cast as a second-rate TV actor; his Jack really is a bit of a dull fellow, but he loves Miles and believes in him, and that belief frees Miles to confront the worst in himself and to find a bottom to his self-pity. At the end of the journey, redemption awaits each man; each, in his own way, will drink the Cheval Blanc before it begins to fade. ♦

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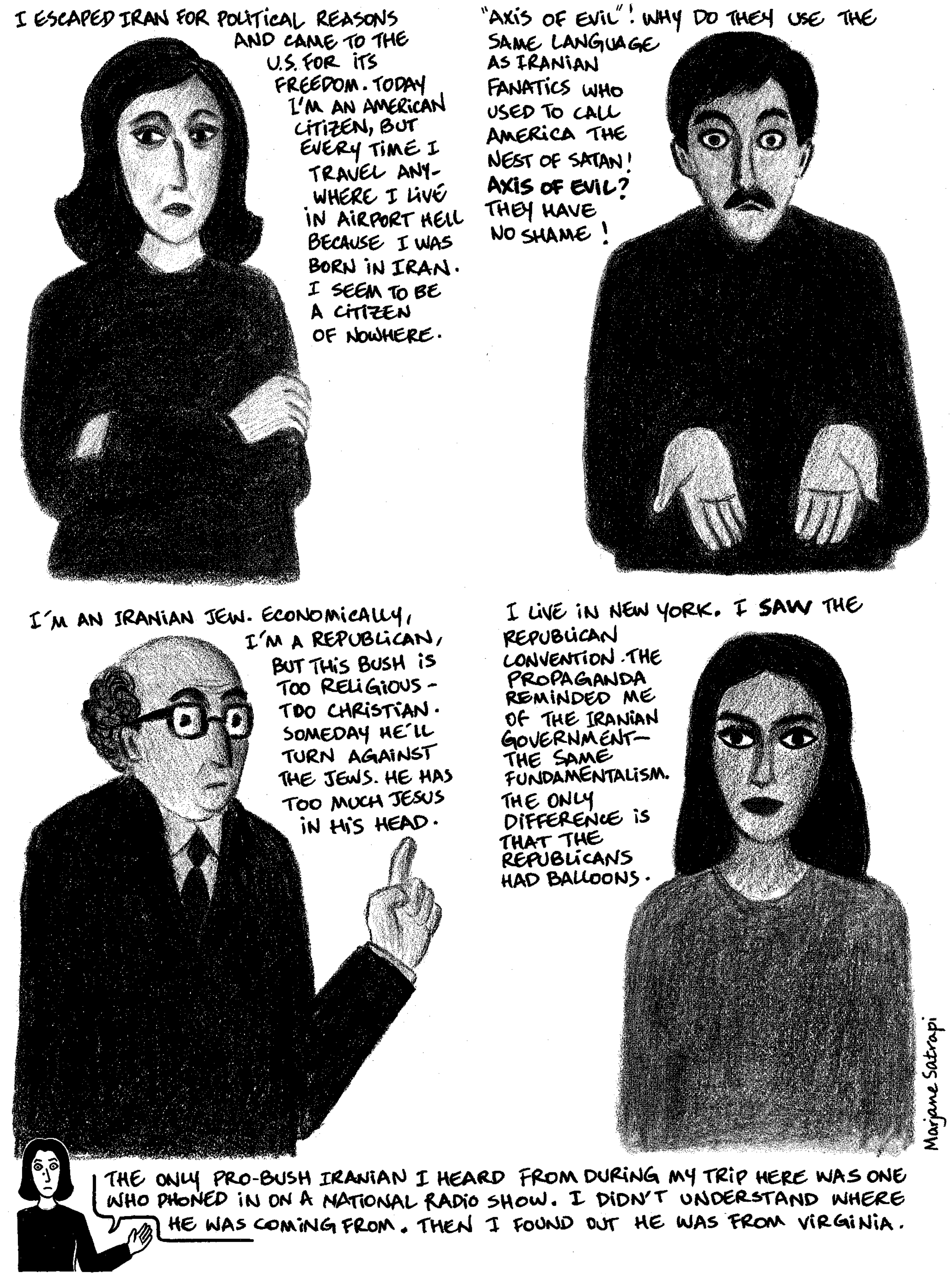
THE BACK PAGE BY MARJANE SATRAPI

IRANIAN-AMERICANS: AN INFORMAL POLL


I ESCAPED IRAN FOR POLITICAL REASONS AND CAME TO THE U.S. FOR ITS FREEDOM. TODAY I'M AN AMERICAN CITIZEN, BUT EVERY TIME I TRAVEL ANYWHERE I LIVE IN AIRPORT HELL BECAUSE I WAS BORN IN IRAN. I SEEM TO BE A CITIZEN OF NOWHERE.
"AXIS OF EVIL"! WHY DO THEY USE THE SAME LANGUAGE AS IRANIAN FANATICS WHO USED TO CALL AMERICA THE NEST OF SATAN! AXIS OF EVIL? THEY HAVE NO SHAME!
I'M AN IRANIAN JEW. ECONOMICALLY, I'M A REPUBLICAN, BUT THIS BUSH IS TOO RELIGIOUS - TOO CHRISTIAN. SOMEDAY HE'LL TURN AGAINST THE JEWS. HE HAS TOO MUCH JESUS IN HIS HEAD.
I LIVE IN NEW YORK. I SAW THE REPUBLICAN CONVENTION. THE PROPAGANDA REMINDED ME OF THE IRANIAN GOVERNMENT— THE SAME FUNDAMENTALISM. THE ONLY DIFFERENCE IS THAT THE REPUBLICANS HAD BALLOONS.
Marjane Satrapi
THE ONLY PRO-BUSH IRANIAN I HEARD FROM DURING MY TRIP HERE WAS ONE WHO PHONED IN ON A NATIONAL RADIO SHOW. I DIDN'T UNDERSTAND WHERE HE WAS COMING FROM. THEN I FOUND OUT HE WAS FROM VIRGINIA.

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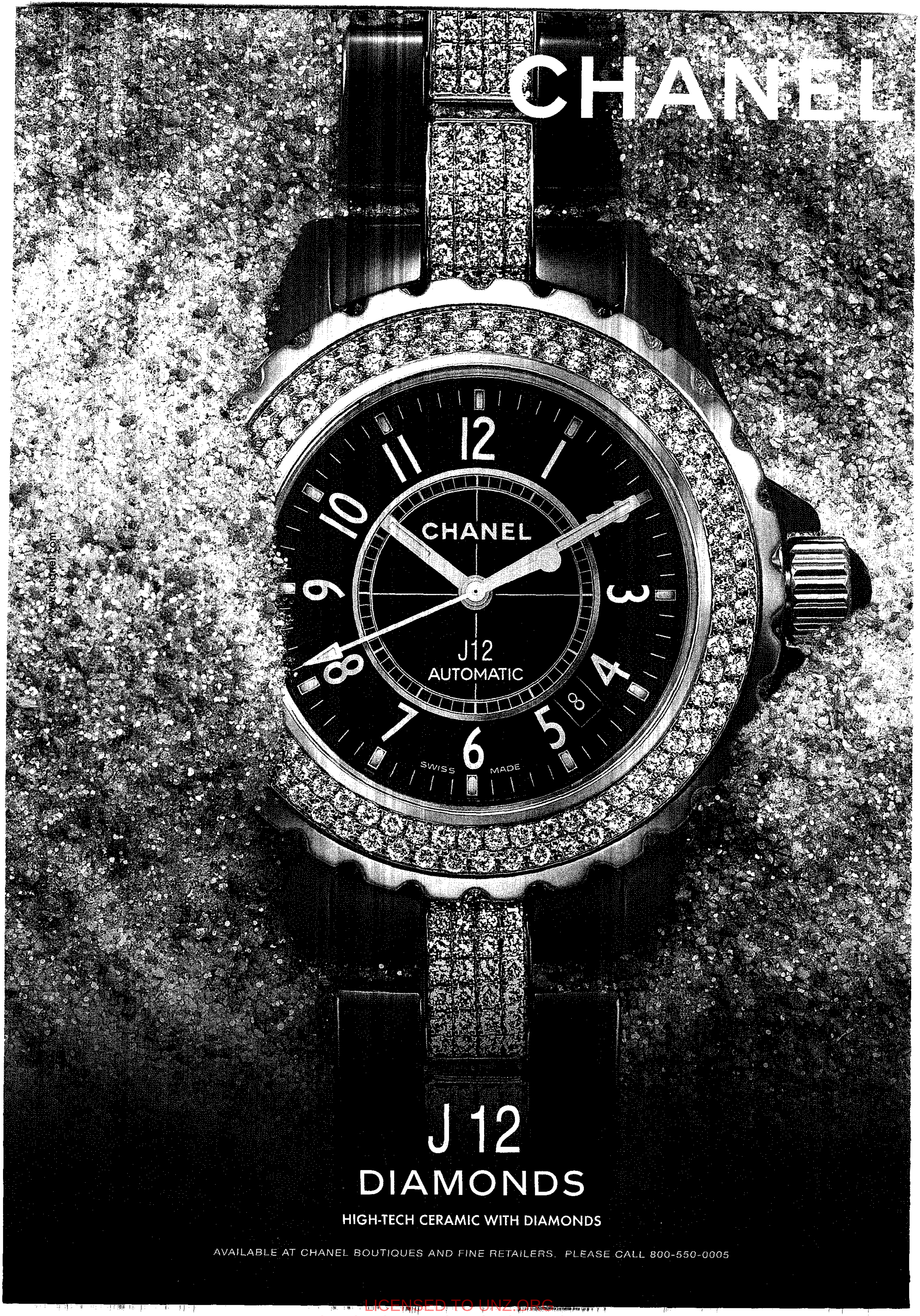
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